
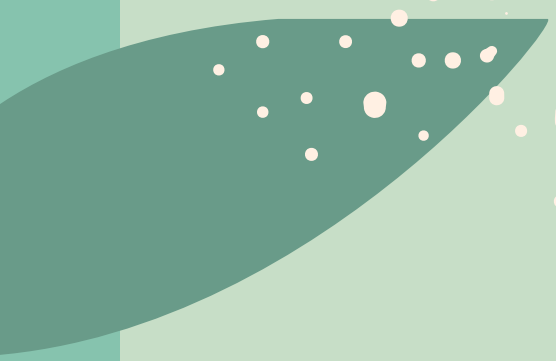


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# **EVALUATION OF THE SHIFTING SYSTEMS INITIATIVE**

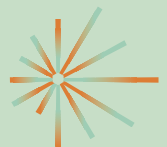
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June 2023

**SHIFTING  
SYSTEMS  
INITIATIVE**



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# 1. Setting the scene

## 1.1.//

### The Systems Shifting Initiative

The [Shifting Systems Initiative](#) (SSI)<sup>1</sup> encourages philanthropic funders to work more collaboratively and to direct longer-term, more adaptive, and more responsive resources to grantees and investees. SSI believes that this method of funding will enable grantees and investees to scale up their solutions to better address the most pressing problems they work on, and contribute to positive systemic change around those challenges. The Initiative was launched in 2016, and over the next five years (2017-2022) SSI conducted research and convened dozens of events with funders and partners in the US, Europe, Africa, Asia, and Latin America.

Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors (RPA) manages the Initiative, providing operational capacity and infrastructure. Financial support comes from RPA's philanthropic partners: the Skoll, Porticus, Ford, and Chandler foundations, with modest additional funding coming in 2023 from Cartier Philanthropy and repeat grants from Skoll and Ford.

The most recent phase of the Initiative started in June 2020 and included the commissioning of an evaluation to inform its next phase, consider how systems change in philanthropy has evolved as a field, and evaluate the role of the Initiative in contributing to that evolution.

## 1.2.//

### Evaluation purpose, questions, and approach

The purpose of this evaluation is twofold: first, to inform the strategic discussions for the next phase of the Initiative. Second, to share its findings with the broader field of actors working on systems change in philanthropy who are interested in participating in the collective dialogue about its future, and in the implications of this evaluation for the field at large.

This evaluation pursues the following five strands of inquiry:

1. How and to what extent has the philanthropy sector taken up the concept of 'systems change'?
2. How and to what extent has SSI contributed to changes in discourse and practices in philanthropy?
3. What were key successes and challenges faced by SSI and what can we learn from them?
4. What have we learned about what works to influence philanthropic behavior? and
5. What are the opportunities for the operational and governance model to be improved?

<sup>1</sup> SSI was originally called Scaling Solutions toward Shifting Systems.

These five questions were the basis for the evaluative inquiry and the findings are presented in this report (Section 2).

Behind this process lay a few strategic dilemmas regarding SSI, and we used emergent learning (EL)<sup>2</sup> throughout the evaluation process to combine our inquiry with an exploration of these dilemmas. This evaluation is intended to contribute to the Steering Group's (SG) work crafting a broader learning agenda for the Initiative. The insights and reflections from SG members gathered during the sense-making moments of the evaluation also informed the recommendations and strategic choices presented in this report (Section 3).

## 1.3//

### A note on learning-led systems evaluation

Learning-led evaluations support strategists and implementers who work in complex environments, helping them assess the patterns and dynamics at play in the systems in which they work. Unlike evaluation approaches that are built on linear thinking and seek determinative answers, this evaluation intends to provide insights that will help SSI grapple with the strategic choices that take place in complex environments, where there is not necessarily a unique, correct, or linear way forward.

In practice, this evaluation has used guiding principles and intentional design choices to develop the frames and methodology used. Over the course of seven months (between December 2022 and June 2023) evaluators and commissioners jointly crafted an evaluation process that drew heavily from emergent learning and learning facilitation tools. Through interviews

and workshops, we gathered information with a variety of actors in philanthropy's systems change ecosystem, reviewing internal documentation and literature. We also used information gleaned from a detailed, annotated bibliography, composed by Sarah Gemski, and a webcrawl analysis conducted by Steve Waddell. Further details regarding the principles and methodology that form the basis for the evaluation can be found in Annex II.

Learning has been central throughout the process, beginning with an in-depth inception stage and continuing through frequent conversations, four sense-making workshops with the participation of the full SSI team, a series of corresponding pre-workshop learning briefs, and one internal debrief workshop for the RPA team.

This report represents a crystallization of the learning to date and builds on the above-mentioned intention of supporting SSI (and other partners in this work) to engage with strategic dilemmas, rather than resolving them. Hence, the findings and recommendations in the report are not intended to provide definitive answers, but rather to deepen understanding and broaden visibility of aspects that will hopefully support the team as they move into the Initiative's next phase.



<sup>2</sup> Darling et al. *Emergent Learning: A Framework for Whole-System Strategy, Learning, and Adaptation*. 2016.

## 2. Summary of findings

The terrain in which the Shifting Systems Initiative (SSI) operates has itself been shifting significantly in recent years. SSI's choices about strategic focus, niche, and positioning for the future are best made while taking into account the following: a deep understanding of the broader context and the dynamics at play in areas in which SSI intervenes, the assets it has developed that serve as the foundation for future work, and the lessons it has learned from its experiments catalyzing change to date.

This report is designed to take readers through this process step by step. First, we share insights about the changing context and its implications for SSI (Section 2.1). Then we synthesize findings about how SSI is perceived and the value it has added to the field, including reflections on the effectiveness of the suite of tactics it has deployed thus far (Section 2.2). Next comes a set of recommendations for increasing SSI's impact in the future, followed finally by five potential scenarios for SSI's position and perspective<sup>3</sup> going forward (Section 3).

### 2.1.//

#### **How and to what extent has the philanthropy sector taken up the concept of systems change?**

In the years since the Shifting Systems Initiative (SSI) was founded, in 2016, the context of systems change work within philanthropy has changed considerably. The conversation is more energetic, there are more discussion spaces around systems change, with a broader participation and interest, with the result that systems change is now a messy, crowded space with a great diversity of orientations, frames, languages, and approaches. This diversity points to a certain

success in disseminating systems concepts in the philanthropic community - itself a heterogeneous community. This diversity also signals the following: 1) Many organizations and their staff are convinced of the value of a systems change focus and are grappling with how to make this shift happen; 2) The variety and number of actors and approaches means that there are many avenues for funders to hear about and connect to systems work; and 3) There is high tolerance for different conceptual interpretations, and the variety of approaches aligns with the diversity of needs, entry points, and applications.

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<sup>3</sup> See Patton, *Strategy as the Focus for Evaluation*, 2010.

However, this same diversity also creates a set of challenges that actors like SSI need to consider as they strategize in this highly complex and increasingly competitive space. These challenges include the following:

- ▶ The field is having difficulty coalescing around a shared, collectively vetted body of evidence and wisdom about what really works.
- ▶ The proliferation of approaches and conceptual confusion in the field has led to some resistance and backlash, with detractors believing that systems change is a fashionable distraction from the real work.
- ▶ Pushback is also coming from those steeped in the equity and social justice discourse, many of whom find systems change language exclusionary and the intervention and problem-solving logic of systems change to be strongly Western, Northern, and even neocolonial in nature.
- ▶ SSI's message and work can get lost among the other voices advocating for systems change.

Much of the systems change work of SSI and similar initiatives is focused on shifting philanthropic practice towards practices that are more informed by systems principles. However, these efforts are confronted with the “stickiness” of the dominant mental models in philanthropy as well as the set of powerful actors who continue to push “command and control” styles of philanthropy. There is a general sense that there is substantially more talk about systems change than action and change in practices or behaviors.

**A proliferation of systems change perspectives, mental models, assumptions, and approaches has created a rich field, but this proliferation has also created confusion and has made for a challenging operating environment.**

There has been a sharp upswing in attention to and interest in “systems change” as a concept in the past 4-5 years within the philanthropic community. A literature review confirmed that the concept of systems change is still evolving and that academic discourse on systems change has likewise not produced critical works that clearly define the field. It is, one could thus say, a field still in the making.

Many philanthropy actors now explicitly embrace systems perspectives, with a small but growing body of gray literature emerging that is practitioner-based, normative/prescriptive, and that includes case studies. We see far more agreement across the sector on core principles and on what does not constitute taking a systems approach than on common features, frameworks, or approaches<sup>4</sup>. Overall, the field's grappling with external-facing aspects of systems change work (i.e., how to diagnose problems and bring about systems change) is more developed, while the field is just beginning to address questions about the internal (institutional and personal) transformations required to engage in systems change work.

<sup>4</sup> There are some shared antecedents. For example, the leverage points work of Donella Meadows is often referred to, as well as the iceberg model, the mental models work of Peter Senge, and systems mapping tools which date from the 1990s. The Waters of Systems Change publication and model has been a more recent (Kania et al, 2018) reference point for some, but many organizations and collaboratives create their own normative frameworks based on their experience and learning with systems change work. Collections of relevant tools are available.



Put broadly, the field of systems change in philanthropy appears to have moved from the framing stage to the networking stage, where innovators are connecting and ideas are proliferating, but practice is not yet converging or maturing (See Table 1)<sup>5</sup>.

► **Table 1**

THE EVOLUTION OF A FIELD OF PRACTICE	
STAGE	CHARACTERISTICS
<b>Framing</b>	Conceptual framing and isolated practice examples.
<b>Networking</b>	Networking of innovators and the proliferation of practices. Practices are fragmented and often considered proprietary.
<b>Maturation</b>	Maturation of practices. Convergence around common methods and tools. Integration of previously differentiated practices. Development of a professional implementation support network.
<b>Standardization</b>	Practices become highly standardized and [...] Reward systems reinforce desired behaviors.

Innovation Network for Communities (INC). 2009

Indeed, both the literature review and the evaluation interviews suggest the sector is not yet coalescing around common definitions, conceptual frameworks, or methods for systems change. Much of the philanthropic literature on systems change tends to be produced by consultants and consulting groups with market incentives to position their thinking, frameworks, and tools as unique and even proprietary. It should be noted that within what academic literature there is, systems research is not considered to have a mature or widely accepted theoretical basis.

Diversity is also reflected in the many terms used to describe systems work (i.e., “taking a systems lens,” “having a systems orientation,” “using systems language,” “using systems frames”)<sup>6</sup>. This diversity is highlighted by stakeholders in

US-based philanthropy as well as in philanthropy in India, Kenya, China, Brazil, and Colombia<sup>7</sup>. In these countries, publications on systems change concepts are in many cases still based on Global North philanthropy practices rather than local experiences and perspectives from the Global South. Interviewees and participatory workshop participants hypothesized that this is part of the wider trend of funders in both the Global North and South undervaluing knowledge and culture that is produced in the Global South and in other historically marginalized communities. The annotated bibliography (Gemski, 2023) also highlighted that phrases like “transformative change,” “community philanthropy,” or “shifting power” were more likely than “systems change” to be used in publications by the Global South philanthropic networks reviewed in this search (see, for example, [EAPN, 2022](#))<sup>8</sup>.

<sup>5</sup> Bridgespan, 2009.

<sup>6</sup> In 2017, an article in SSIR identified three dominant understandings of systems in philanthropy: 1. addressing root causes, 2. adapting to complexity, 3. catalyzing large-scale change (Vexler, *What Exactly Do We Mean by Systems?*, 2017).

<sup>7</sup> The evaluation hosted participatory dialogues about the national funding ecosystem with philanthropic and civil society organizations from Brazil, Colombia, China, India and Kenya as SSI had worked with these organizations in 2019 and 2020 (more on this in Section 2.2).

<sup>8</sup> East Africa Philanthropy Network, *Philanthropy and Changing Power Dynamics*, 2022.

Our analysis identified a number of communities, with corresponding bodies of literature and tools, formed around distinct underlying assumptions about how philanthropy can affect systems change. These are loosely underpinned by different disciplinary branches that inform the systems change field, from complexity science, to ecological theory, to social systems theory. The underlying assumptions and theories of change of these communities could be framed as follows:

We change systems by working together.	Systems change takes place through collaboration across sectors and levels of intervention, through the combined efforts of a number of foundations, and by working from the local to the global level.
We change systems by seeing the system and understanding systems thinking better.	Systems change takes place through <b>systems tools and practices</b> . This means using systems language, frames, and tools to map and identify intervention points. This also entails the education of other foundations and grantees in the use of systems tools.
We change systems through scaling.	By identifying individuals/organizations that are innovating, and supporting them as they <b>scale their work</b> , we can have more influence in shifting the system. In other words, change is made by finding the future today and promoting that. It is also about scaling at the level of systems, emphasizing the interconnectedness of innovating individuals/organizations with other stakeholders in the system. The selection of grantees is made according to the foundation's values and goals.
We change systems by focusing on power structures, shifting power relations and ensuring that disadvantaged groups gain more power in a new and different system.	Systems change takes place through changing <b>structures of hierarchies</b> . This entails a focus on identifying underlying structures that can be leveraged to make sustainable changes. Systems change through funding social movements, activism, networks that openly challenge power hierarchies around wealth, race, gender, etc. This tends to align with a focus on "transition" and an interest in participatory grantmaking.
We change systems by changing ourselves and our relationships.	Systems change takes place through <b>deep internal work</b> within the foundation to deal with <b>imbalanced power relations, structural inequity, historic trauma, and racism, and by bringing anti-racism and complex intersectional power analyses to practice</b> . This tends to align with interest in trust-based philanthropy and participatory grantmaking.

## Implications for the future of the field and for SSI

The diversity of perspectives about systems change work that is found in the broader field will affect funders working collaboratively, and is also reflected at a smaller scale within SSI's Steering Group (more on this below in Section 2.2). We have observed that the values and beliefs of a particular funder will determine its choices about which of the systems change funding principles and practices it will emphasize, and which it will ignore. Importantly, both for initiatives like SSI and for funders who are trying to navigate the diverse array of systems change theories, tools, and frameworks, these underlying assumptions are often invisible and can even often be at odds

with one another. These unspoken assumptions and at times conflicting ideas about systems change can create frustration and cynicism within teams if they are understood as being at odds with each other or being mutually exclusive. This interpretation can reduce teams' ability to implement a systems change approach and can even unintentionally trigger backlash or resistance. Although the diversity of ideas in the field provides opportunities for rich thinking and debate, it also creates a more challenging operating environment for SSI and others who are hoping to see significant behavior shifts among philanthropic institutions.

Over the last three years, socio-political events and converging trends have significantly accelerated interest and pressure for equitable and power-aware systems change in philanthropy.

The rise in interest in systems change has been attributed to a number of factors, both external and internal to the philanthropic world. Principal among the external factors have been a series of global events that have been crucial to the adoption of systems change theories in northern and western foundations. The collapse of the financial market in 2008 and the emergence of the Occupy Wall Street movement in the US influenced the impact investing field. The murder of George Floyd, the subsequently reignited Black Lives Matter movement, and the resulting national conversation in the USA focused on questions of structural racism, inequity, and power have all been instrumental in focusing attention on the promise of systems change work (as well as increasing criticism of its disappointing returns thus far). This conversation has affected philanthropy beyond the US and the centrality and scale of the subsequent racial justice reckoning was highlighted by different evaluation participants, across many geographies<sup>9</sup>. Similarly, the global pandemic and growing awareness of the climate crisis, combined with political gains

among authoritarian movements globally, have shaken up philanthropy in the US and beyond. The conversation around systems change itself has changed, focusing now on the idea that grappling with power and equity is critical to systems change work<sup>10</sup>, and this is accompanied by the critique that systems change work in its current form is insufficient to addressing power and equity or, much worse, is reinforcing unjust arrangements.

*Within philanthropy, there is a wide range of understandings of systems change. On one hand, women's and feminist funds have long incorporated systems change into their core principles, such as communities of care and including social movements in their decision-making. On the other hand, some funders have rigid and heavily top-down structures, while simultaneously holding a disproportionately significant amount of money and power. Individuals in these spaces often make sole decisions on the allocation of immense funds, with little understanding of or connection to grassroots movements, indigenous communities, or other local communities that have the most innovative and essential solutions to our global crises. These top-down actions then perpetuate systems of oppression rather than address the root causes of injustice.*

.....  
Kézha Hatier-Riess,  
Global Greengrants Fund

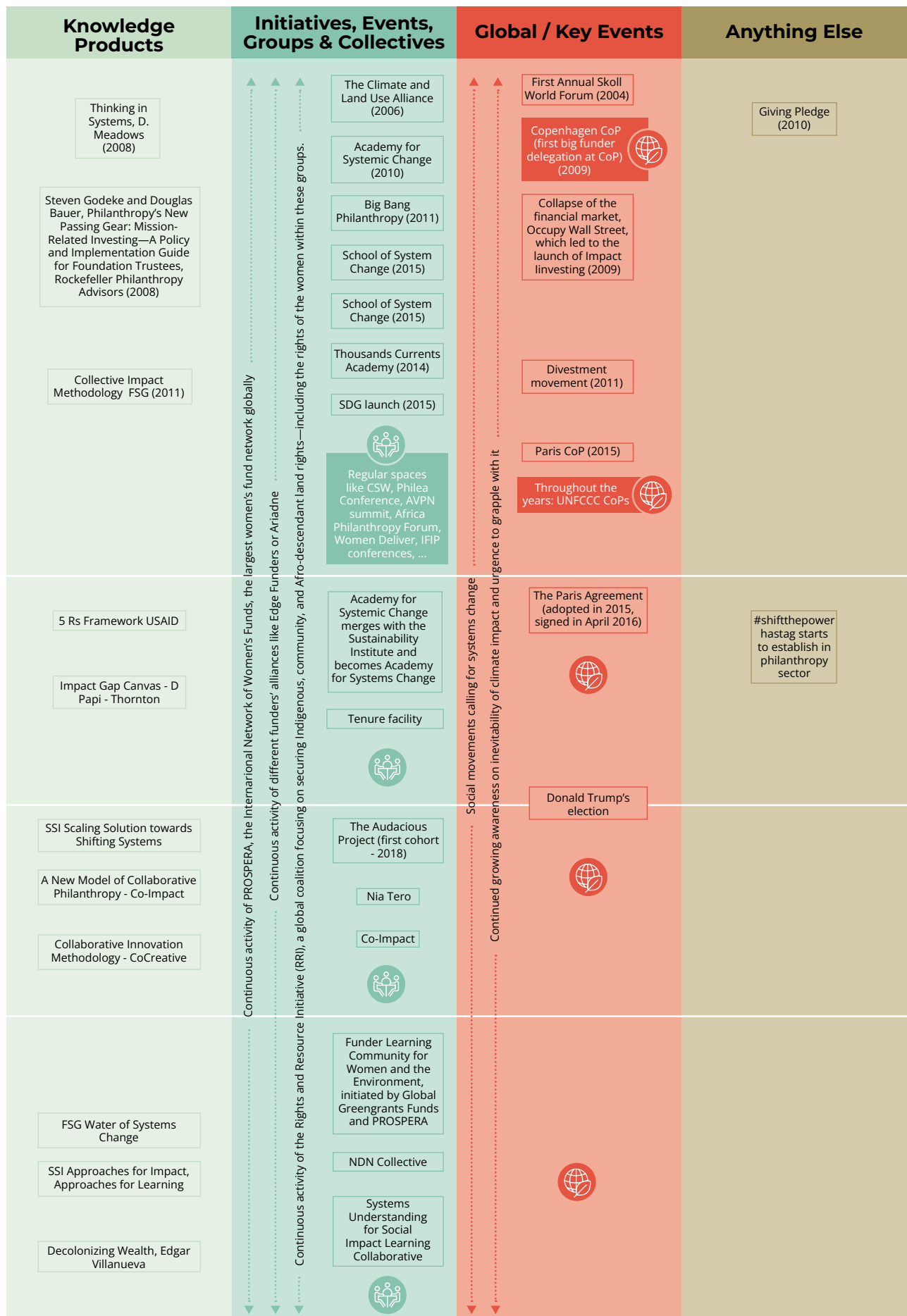
The COVID-19 pandemic created logistical problems for philanthropy, but also shed new light on pre-existing social disparities, particularly social, racial, and gender inequalities, as the spread of the virus, lockdown measures, and unequal access to vaccines have affected different social groups differently, exacerbated by the fact that the vaccine roll-out reflected existing power imbalances among nations. For many, COVID-19 also spurred a drive towards more flexible funding approaches, at least for the duration of the pandemic. According to people we talked to in this evaluation, the pandemic played a big role in accelerating a focus on systems change among foundations in Colombia and Brazil, for example, and provided a greater incentive for collaboration among donors and regranters and pushed funders to work with communities to solve urgent needs.

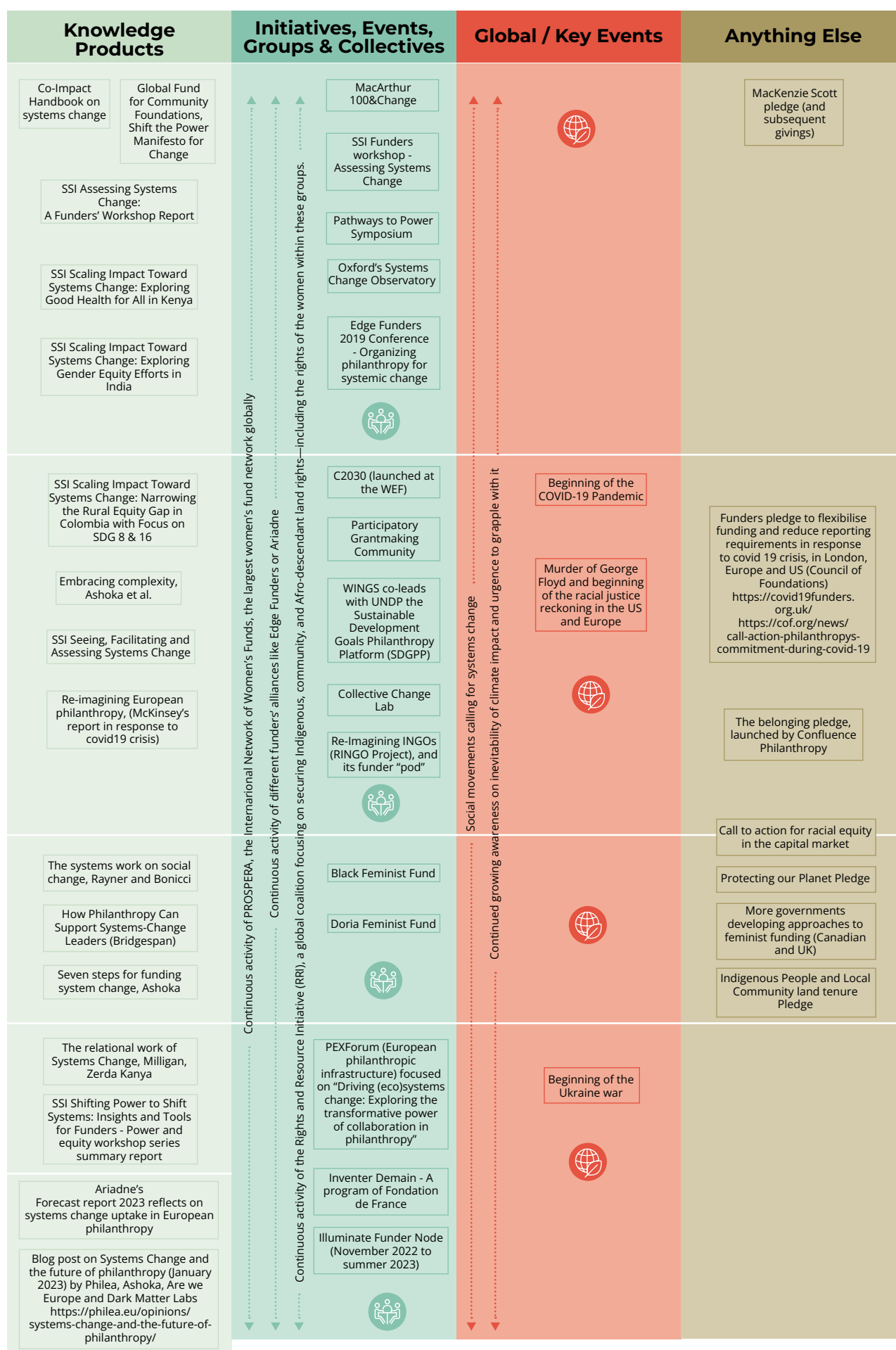
<sup>9</sup> Note that the events highlighted here are primarily based in the US. This is a reflection of US-centricity in global philanthropy in general, and in this evaluation as well, despite efforts to bring perspectives from stakeholders outside the US.

<sup>10</sup> Petty et al, *Systems Change & Deep Equity: Pathways Towards Sustainable Impact, Beyond "Eureka!", Unawareness & Unwitting Harm*. 2020.

## Systems Change and Philanthropy Timeline

Major events, key publications, projects and initiatives that have shaped systems change and philanthropy in the past decade





This chart represents the variety of perspectives around systems change in philanthropy described in the rest of the report; it also reflects Global North / US-centered views of 'global events' that predominates in the philanthropic ecosystem of SSI and in this evaluation work. Note that all SSI publications are represented on this chart. For a discussion of how influential these were, see Section 2.2 of the report.

This socio-political context, combined with the tireless labor of many activists—working both inside and outside philanthropy—and organizations to change philanthropy, have contributed to convergence of three discourses that are interrelated with systems change:

- ▶ As mentioned before, considerations around equity, justice, and the decolonization of wealth have gained momentum and become increasingly linked to systems change concepts, as the need for philanthropy to grapple with power relations also gained momentum from 2016 onwards<sup>11</sup>.
- ▶ Significant interest is building for flexible, unrestricted, general operating funding. This is driven by the **Trust Based Philanthropy Initiative**<sup>12</sup>, in the US, and the **Open & Trusting initiative**<sup>13</sup> of the Institute for Voluntary Action Research, in the UK, and has been amplified by the high-profile entry of MacKenzie Scott in the philanthropy scene. This type of funding enables shifts in relationships and power, the “below the waterline” dimensions of systems change that prove hardest for many foundations to embrace.
- ▶ Finally, the idea of **transformation or transformative change** is sometimes presented as one mode of systems change (e.g., juxtaposing incremental change with radical or transformational change to underlying systems rules and arrangements), and sometimes as the end goal (transformation of a system that is being perceived as dysfunctional by an actor or actors). There is now a growing body of work around transformative inner work and relational work<sup>14</sup>, which are considered by many systems change theorists to be essential, as philanthropic practitioners and institutions are participants in the system they are trying to affect rather than actors who observe and manipulate systems from a distance.

In parallel, other trends specific to philanthropy are important to highlight. There seems to be some momentum for the creation of funds aimed at directly funding Indigenous-led organizations, such as Nia Tero and NDN Collective, community-led organizations, feminist movements, such as the recently created Black Feminist Fund and Doria Feminist Fund, and social movements more broadly through reganters. There is also a growing interest in participatory grant-making, the result of values pushed by social movements, including values of democratization, decolonization, shifting decision-making power, and concepts of justice, all of which are now increasingly permeating philanthropy.



<sup>11</sup> The hashtag #ShiftThePower started to establish itself in philanthropy in 2016, see Irfan, *What will it take to shift power in grantmaking?* 2022.

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.trustbasedphilanthropy.org/>

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.ivar.org.uk/flexible-funders/>

<sup>14</sup> See, for example, Milligan et al, *The Relational Work of System Change*, 2022.



## Implications for the future of the field and for SSI

At first glance, these philanthropic trends appear to compete with one another for attention and salience in a crowded field of philanthropy-influencing efforts, all of which are trying to respond to socio-political crises through different frames. However, several interviewees believed the convergence of socio-political events and crises with the general trends in philanthropy mentioned earlier offer the opportunity to accelerate the adoption of higher-quality systems change work, provided that the systems change field 1) *becomes more adept at foregrounding issues of power and equity* and 2) *partners more effectively with philanthropy-influencing initiatives that connect with funders through different entry points and frames*.

**An explosion of interest is fueling a new infrastructure of systems change support, yet many remain frustrated by a lack of evidence of action.**

Many collaborative learning spaces within philanthropy are beginning to support a systems change frame. SSI, Catalyst 2030, Illuminate, the Systems Understanding for Social Impact (SUSI) learning collaborative, and others devoted to collective discussion and learning about systems change have de-risked this space, opened new venues for learning and dialogue, and have effectively made it a risk to not explore systems change. Although these conversations are still being led by a small number of organizations relative to the philanthropy world as a whole, there are an increasing number of spaces to connect (conferences, meetings), more invitations for regrants or grantees to share insights, and more studies, reports, examples, tools, and models devoted to trying to understand what

having a focus on systems change means both in theory and practice.

However, field commentators and several of our interviewees assert that many foundations have adopted systems language without a clear understanding of what it means in practice and without a corresponding shift in funding practices. Most said that, while there is a lot of talk, there is not a lot of “walk.” While some organizations noted greater openness for collaborative partnerships, or being invited to join spaces that they did not have access to before, it has proven difficult to translate conversation and learning into a deeper quality of funding practice.

*I think a lot of funders are in the space we are, where they've picked up the lingo of systems change, but they don't really understand what it means and how to apply it in their day-to-day work.*

.....  
Foundation staff

The risk of a foundation adopting systems change terminology and framing without a corresponding shift in practice is threefold. First, grant applicants and recipients bear the unnecessary burden of re-tooling their own language to fit funders’ new frameworks with no real benefit to themselves. Second, obscuring old practices with new language reduces funder accountability for their effects on the field. Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, according to interviewees, the organizations, communities, and people at the forefront of more transformative system change are struggling to raise funds for their work<sup>15</sup>. In a sector that is known for being risk-averse, this calls for a rethinking of where the actual risks lie, and for whom (see Annex I).

<sup>15</sup> Ali, *In My View: Funding more proximately isn't risky but not doing so is.*, 2022.

*I think the way that funders fund also needs to match the scale of the problems that exist and the requirements for delivering systems change. So that means larger, longer-term, more flexible grant making, where the people who really know what the system's change needs to be, who understand the problem on the ground, and who understand the context, who know the key actors, who have the right partnerships. So it's putting them in the driving seat by providing that more flexible, open funding.*

---

Mitali Wroczynski,  
Co-Impact

Many stakeholders identified this lack of follow-through as a major factor impeding systems change work in different geographies and across different types of organizations. Box 1 reviews the funding landscapes in countries where SSI has sponsored gatherings—Brazil, Colombia, China, India, and Kenya—from the perspectives of philanthropic and civil society organizations that took part in the dialogues the evaluation team hosted.





## Box 1 //

### Spotlight of insights on the funding landscape in Brazil, China, Colombia, Kenya, and India

#### COUNTRY

#### REFLECTIONS ON THE FUNDING LANDSCAPE

##### Brazil



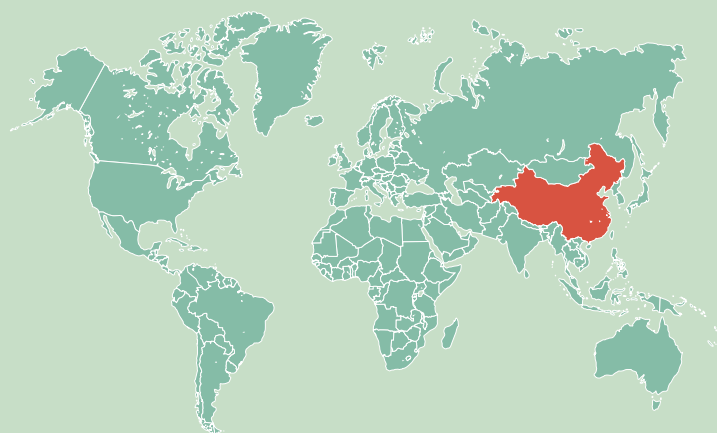
Changes in the political sphere directly influenced the philanthropic landscape and increased collaboration to protect democratic health. The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the collaboration between civil society and philanthropic funders, to provide emergency response. This collaboration has continued ever since, part of the efforts to strengthen the country's democratic health and with the intention to put Brazil back in the international spotlight. Beyond the usual incentives for individual organizations to promote their branding in order to secure funding, civil society has organized to protect itself as a collective.

The philanthropic community in Brazil seems more comfortable embracing complexity and recognizes the need to work collaboratively to address complex challenges. Blended finance mechanisms have also increased collaboration and enabled new connections in the search of new co-funding arrangements (i.e., the Brazilian National Bank matches donations received from other sources). Beyond the diversity of funding sources, actors value the diversity in perspectives and ideas that this new plurality of actors is bringing.

## COUNTRY

## REFLECTIONS ON THE FUNDING LANDSCAPE

## China



Some funders recognize the promise of systems change approaches, and have adopted systems change theory and systems change solutions as tools to address key issues. In practice, this has produced some improvements in reporting in some organizations. However, overall there has been no big shift towards systems change behaviors and no significant progress on the availability of core funding, for example, with the continued dominance of results-based analysis and the prevalence of the idea that operating costs should not be covered. COVID-19 also had an impact on philanthropic resources, and this decline hampered the further development of systems change practice in China.

Systems change is perceived as a foreign funder-led idea that needs to be localized and aligned to fit with national funders' priorities and strategies. Government limitations on foreign intervention also encourage this localization process. There are some examples of peer learning among Chinese funders around systems change, and some government policy does support collaboration among funders. There could also be a potential role for China in south-south collaboration, as part of developing the philanthropic sectors in different countries in the Global South, with China sharing its learning about how systems change can help improve philanthropy. New entrants into the philanthropy sector in China (namely large tech companies, and other companies that surged during the pandemic) may be allies in renovating the philanthropic sector.

## COUNTRY

## REFLECTIONS ON THE FUNDING LANDSCAPE

## Colombia



While Colombia was dominated by very traditional approaches to philanthropy until recently, systems change is gaining interest. It is perceived as an imperative for foundations to gain a more holistic understanding of issues they are funding, in addition to collaborating with other actors on those issues. While some stakeholders fault domestic foundations for not taking enough time to reflect on their place in the system, the COVID-19 pandemic has substantially increased system-level collaboration, and stakeholders acknowledge that this collaboration is needed to be effective and to achieve scale moving forward. In the last few years, more grant-making and operational foundations have been planning using a systems lens, rather than a project mindset. Funders have encouraged civil society organizations to connect and collaborate with others who have complementary capabilities or skills. There is more mutual recognition of the value that individual actors can bring to the whole, and a conviction that to achieve large scale systems, different types of actors need to collaborate (civil society, government, private sector, etc.). The private sector has emerged as a new actor partnering with civil society, and is focusing on Environmental, Social and Governance factors (ESGs). Some actors even identify a shift in the sector culture, which is becoming less concerned about individual space and contribution, with less ego and self-promotion, and exhibiting more willingness to explore what it would take to make the biggest impact.

Despite this meaningful evolution, certain counterproductive practices persist. Many funders (particularly international and multilateral agencies) continue providing short-term funding, assessing performance against initial targets and plans, and using a project mindset to direct their spending.

## COUNTRY

## REFLECTIONS ON THE FUNDING LANDSCAPE

## India



There is growing interest in systems change concepts, marked by diverse nomenclature and understandings across the sector. For example, actors interchangeably refer to ecosystem change, scaling, collaboration, creating linkages between sectors and actors, and so on. There is a greater availability of tools, resources, and research, as well as examples of experiments and innovations associated with systems change that are helping to create confidence in the approach. This all points to systems change being a more accepted concept within philanthropy, but at the same time systems change is not considered to have had a significant impact on foundations' funding practices. The COVID-19 pandemic is considered to have interrupted the conversation around systems change within philanthropy in India and slowed changes in practice. COVID-19 also focused the efforts of foundations on relief and resilience in short term, rather longer-term, systems change initiatives.

Leadership in and support of working with systems change concepts is perceived as emerging from foreign philanthropic organizations and is even identified as reflecting the neocolonialist attitude of foreign philanthropy.

Priorities for systems change may be set in funders' global headquarters outside of India, and organizational structures are not set up to break down silos and work across sectors.

This is further complicated by legislative changes restricting foreign funding opportunities and limiting funding for grassroots and civil society organizations (CSOs). Increasingly, new entrants in the philanthropic sector are interested in tackling more complex issues, and are shifting away from the idea that scale is about the number of people reached, and looking at issues intersectionally and holistically.

## COUNTRY

## REFLECTIONS ON THE FUNDING LANDSCAPE

## Kenya



More collaboration between funders and among different actors were noted, but overall funding is shrinking due to Kenya emerging as a lower middle-income country, and consequent reduction of official development assistance (ODA), which is also in part a result of the rise of far-right governments in the Global North. On the other hand, policies and regulations put in place by the government have dampened the desire of many organizations to support and fund Kenyan organizations.

The landscape for quality funding is exhibiting signs of more long-term funding and more flexibility from donors, but core funding is lacking. A dire lack of funding for grassroots organizations was noted, and for women-led work in particular. A lack of trust between funders, intermediaries, and grantees was highlighted, and evaluation participants pointed out that local, Kenyan knowledge and experience are undervalued. This shows up, for example, in how philanthropy frames and conducts “capacity building,” and also shapes the assumptions behind these efforts and the language used. It was mentioned that there is a “colonial” attitude to Kenyan knowledge and tradition, and that local expertise is not leveraged, which in turn limits the adoption of systems change in the country. Some observed the emergence of a different approach to partnership, however, characterized by openness to two-way conversations, an interest in working in partnership in a humble way, and general donor appetite for learning. The role of feminist funders was also highlighted, crediting them with introducing different ways of working (such as asking grantees to provide a single one page report, rather than cumbersome, repeated, and lengthy reports).

## Implications for the future of the field and for SSI

Interviewees from civil society organizations (CSOs) focused on transformational systems change often explained the gap between language and action as a result of the following factors: philanthropy's predominant mental models about change, assumptions about impact<sup>16</sup> and the need to demonstrate "success", obsession with (quantitative) measurement (also see Annex I). These are linked to the undervaluing of Indigenous/homegrown Global South knowledge and that of historically marginalized communities overall, as a result of how power structures shape mental models as well as entrenched mistrust and racism. Moving from talking about systems change to funding systems change requires not only training, frameworks, and tools, but a deep mindset change and paradigm shift. While not necessarily a new insight, this should encourage SSI and other philanthropy-influencing initiatives working on systems change to think more deeply about the strategies and tactics that are most likely to break through to these deeper drivers of philanthropic behavior.

While momentum for systems change as a philanthropic approach is growing in many arenas, we are also seeing resistance and critique emerging on multiple fronts.

While embracing systems change in its many forms is generally thought to be a positive evolutionary step for philanthropy, the differences in ambition and approach are starting to trigger pushback in some places.

One rift in the field is **"radical/transformational" thinking versus "pragmatic/incremental" thinking**. Predominant approaches to systems change work in philanthropy are perceived by some as focused on making existing systems

more effective, whereas systems change work focused on transformation is about shifting the underlying goals of the system, examining power structures, and pursuing a realignment of power. Some see activities such as pooled funding, funding collaboration, the shift to general operating support, and the alignment of investments to reflect a foundation's values as not holding a sufficiently clear and ambitious picture of a more just and equitable future. This is driving some actors to abandon the language and framing of systems change in favor of "transformative change strategies." Others are leaving collaboratives that they perceive are not ambitious enough in pursuing transformational rather than incremental change goals.

*I see an interesting distinction between "systems change" and "transformation"... the former is being "dragged down" into being relatively modest in comparison with its original protagonists, and focused on the "external." Transformation is increasingly incorporating and transcending "systems change."*

*Systems change thinks about: "How do we make the system more effective?" And that's not what transformation is about. Transformation is talking about, "What are the goals of the system? Who should we be? Are we doing the right things?" and ... dealing with power structure and powered realignment?*

*Transformation is painful for many, many people.*

.....  
Steve Waddell,  
Bounce Beyond

<sup>16</sup> See Joshi, Plotting Impact Beyond Simple Metrics, 2022.



Relatedly, **many see systems change as another form of exercising “power over.”** Some evaluation participants shared stories of foundations and civil society organizations rejecting the tools and language of systems change as technocratic, Western, and neocolonial, as systems change practices can sometimes be carried out using a colonial charity model vis-à-vis historically marginalized social groups, which reproduces colonial dynamics and leads to a perpetuation of those same mindsets. Some evaluation participants also questioned the ability of systems change to bring about deep changes, as it is becoming more and more mainstream. We specifically heard from interviewees in the Global South that systems change practice is often viewed as an extension of the Northern/Western “assistance” view of international development, which can make things worse, particularly when paired with a lack of understanding of the local system. In this case, Northern/Western foundations promoting systems change approaches can replicate the same power dynamics and lack of humility that deeper systems change aims to address.

An alternative to systems change that we heard in this evaluation focuses on just transition. This framing acknowledges that what is needed is to foster a path to a different society, one that would address current systemic power imbalances. Ultimately it is about a transition towards a new set of rules for the game, rather than shifting power within an existing set of rules.

*I don't really talk about systems change myself anymore. I don't think that's a helpful frame. And I think it's come to mean so many different things. And I find it quite hollow. To me, talking about a systemic lens is about understanding that we need to look at root causes, understanding that everything is interdependent and interconnected. Understanding that the sort of scale and complexity that we need to work with is a systems scale, having a systemic lens, I think is helpful. But I've found a lot of the systems*

*change concepts to become increasingly unhelpful. So personally, [this] is not language I use in my work. And I've not really talked about it for quite a few years. And instead, I definitely talk about transitions. I talk about systems shifting design, but mostly I find the framing of transitions much more useful. I think because we just are in transition, as a society, as an economy. There's lots of ways in which we know where we're transitioning, and I think transition is plural. So I think it becomes less questionable, because when you use the language of systems change, people are like what system? You know, what does that even mean? Can you really change a system? Whereas I think, just acknowledging that we are in many big transitions, the question becomes, what's the role then for you as an individual, you as an organization, you as a funder? What's the role or roles for you to play within transitions?*

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Cassie Robinson,  
Paul Hamlyn Foundation and Joseph  
Rowntree Foundation

Those promoting social justice in philanthropy push for a clear-eyed examination of the current limits of systems change work and assert that philanthropy has co-opted and de-radicalized the concept. The same **capitalist structure and individualist mindset** that produced many foundations influences what philanthropy can and is willing to do to change systems.



*I think the type of changes that these recommendations or these theoretical concepts on systems change are calling for are so deep and are so structural, that [this] would mean the end of philanthropy in itself. How do we work towards dismantling philanthropy? And of course, there's resistance and there is shyness and there is reservation, or there is hesitation, containment about the next step, what comes if philanthropy is really dismantled. And I think it has a lot to do with risk, the aversion of risk, the deep core risk. And ultimately, I struggle and I think there is a struggle, to imagine the end of capitalism, or the end of philanthropy, or the end of how these systems operate. And I'm not sure we need to have the imagination of what comes after, before we act. I think these probably need to happen in parallel, I mean the planning of a post-capitalism era and the doing of it. But definitely, I think, while there are more of these talks, rhetorics, concepts, small changes out there, I think that funders still want to keep certain control of the journey of the resources, of these transformations, or at least be seen as catalysts of transformations. Which is understandable. But then who are we fooling? How can funders be even more honest about where they are? And how much power are they willing to cede?*

.....  
 Maria Alejandra Escalante,  
 FRIDA | The Young Feminist Fund

Interviewees also highlighted the historic structural inequalities that determine whose knowledge is valued by foundations. Several interviewees reflect that people from Indigenous and racialized communities<sup>17</sup>, along with Global South-ern and local knowledge, are undervalued, and there is a dominant belief that Northern-centric and white ways of knowing “know best.” This leads to foundations—including

those ostensibly engaging in systems change—to favor working with collaborators who also have Global North-based educations, language skills, money, and power, which perpetuates structural inequalities. More importantly, this often excludes organizations at the forefront of systems change work.

**At the same time, pushback against systems change approaches to philanthropy are coming from those who see systems change as an apolitical and depersonalized field of interest, versus systems change as a field of practices that refer to how we forge relationships, the perspectives we take, and how we show up.**

Interviewees observed that some field-influencing systems initiatives and systems change champions treat systems change acumen as a set of skills and practices that can be taught and mastered and applied to solve problems (i.e., a more sophisticated technocratic diagnostic and planning approach). Others treat systems change as a way of being in relationship to other actors in the system, which requires deeper cultural shifts in an organization than a mastery of concepts and tools. Many interviewees note growing gaps between foundation boards and staff, where a more conservative board is not as convinced as staff about practice changes or about the value of the internal journey needed to adopt and support more transformative change goals.

*In terms of a Foundation's work, it's like the foundations are always thinking transformations are for the people that we give money to or we invest in. It's not “for us”.*

.....  
 Steve Waddell,  
 Bounce Beyond

<sup>17</sup> We use “racialized communities” here to refer to all communities that do not enjoy the privileges of white people as a result of the socially constructed process of racialization, following the work of Bonilla-Silva, *Rethinking Racism: Toward a Structural Interpretation*, 1997.



### Implications for the future of the field and for SSI

Evaluation data suggest that momentum for systems change is at an inflection point, with a high risk of resistance and rejection despite growing attention in the literature and among philanthropy-influencing initiatives. Without serious and open reflection on the ways systems change proponents have intentionally or unintentionally reinforced existing patterns of exclusion and co-optation. Without explicit strategies to remedy this tendency, the approach is likely to become another come-and-gone fad in the history of philanthropy. A reckoning with these issues would require a much more explicit stance on transformation, a shift in how and by whom systems change “knowledge” is produced, and a new set of partnerships anchored in the leadership of those at the forefront of transformational work.

- ▶ The field needs initiatives that are specifically focused on countering resistance from those who bring a “command and control” frame and have the power to sway the larger field.
- ▶ The field needs initiatives and champions of systems change to take stock, candidly and transparently, of the ways in which they have reinforced underlying relationships, power dynamics, and mental models that underpin current structures of exclusion and oppression, and to transform themselves accordingly in partnership with those already doing transformative work.

### CONCLUDING INSIGHTS AND IMPLICATIONS OF THE CHANGING CONTEXT FOR SSI

We can draw some insights for consideration about what is needed in the field to catalyze more resources moving towards and enabling systems change:

- ▶ The field needs more focused work on the deeper levers of change (at the bottom of the iceberg), including power. The initiatives and consultants that are promoting systems change work need to ensure they support this kind of reflection and work in foundations. See Figure 1 below.
- ▶ The field needs more coalescing around strategies and behaviors that contribute to *transformation*, and there is momentum to do so as several trending ideas in philanthropy are converging.



In the earlier stages of the field's development, SSI was able to use its voice, network, and credibility to catalyze initial conversations in multiple places, with a variety of approaches, and seeding ideas broadly (see Section 2.2 below for the effectiveness of these tactics). However, the current context no longer needs that type of "seeding," as the field is well-seeded and already growing rapidly! This shift in context calls for SSI and its allies to think in a more strategic and targeted way about how to influence the larger philanthropic system in ways that attend more deeply to questions of power,

relationships, and mental models (including its own). This space is now full of actors and initiatives working from different angles to change philanthropic behavior to support transformation.

In order to make these choices about intervention points, SSI needs to understand what assets it brings, what has resulted from its experiments so far, and what others see as its most powerful potential role to this end. This is the focus of the next section of this report.



Figure 1: Iceberg model, as presented in SSI 2018 Report: Approaches for Impact, Approaches for Learning

## 2.2.//

### How and to what extent has SSI's work contributed to changes in discourse and practices in philanthropy?

#### REACH AND REPUTATION

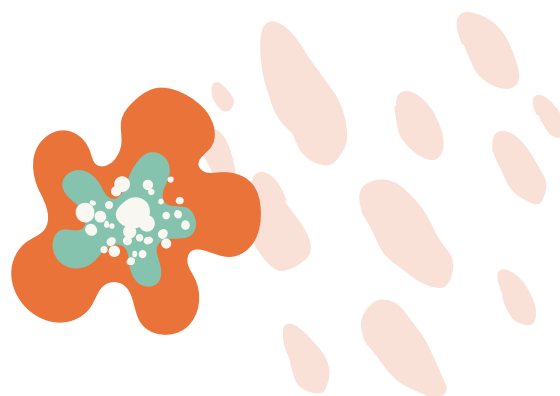
Though moderately known, SSI benefits from significant convening power, thanks to the reputation, credibility, and network of RPA and member funders.

SSI's leadership reputation and network, the credibility of RPA and its staff, and the SG members' networks are all major factors supporting the Initiative's reputation and its convening power. The Initiative itself is moderately known. Some key systems change players—field-building Initiative staff, regranters, including participatory regranters, or influential persons pushing for deep changes in philanthropy, in Europe for example—do not know the Initiative or have heard of it but do not know much about it. However, RPA and SSI's leadership are well known, and their reputations drive the reputation of SSI. The Initiative's leader is seen as credible, influential with funders, and a brilliant thinker, and at times this reputation has been the driver of attendance to workshops organized by the initiative. RPA is also considered generous in the sharing of their network and credible, and is as such influential among philanthropic funders and in the impact investing field, thanks to its trailblazing 2008 and 2009 publications<sup>18</sup>.

Over the years, the Initiative has organized many gatherings, including large convenings at the Skoll World Forum and during UN General Assembly week for example, as well as smaller workshops,

with participation from funders, intermediaries, governments, and civil society. **By 2021, the Initiative had reached more than 400 different philanthropic funding institutions, not counting those of SSI's SG members and RPA, and over 200 intermediaries, more than 40 government and intergovernmental funders, and 260 NGOs.** Almost half of the philanthropic funders and intermediaries were organizations with headquarters in the USA, with Global North or North American funding regions (when the data is available).

While the convening power of SSI was hampered by the COVID-19 pandemic, its ability to convene so many different institutions is remarkable. It is a testament to SSI's leader, RPA's reputation, as well as the leadership of the members of the Steering Group (SG). Indeed, SG members have repeatedly shared their contacts and knowledge of key stakeholders in the ecosystem.



<sup>18</sup> Godeke et al, *Philanthropy's New Passing Gear: Mission-Related Investing—A Policy and Implementation Guide for Foundation Trustees*, 2008; Godeke et al, *Solutions for Impact Investors: From Strategy to Implementation*, 2009.

## KEY CONTRIBUTIONS

SSI and its leader are identified as key front-runners by those familiar with the Initiative. The 2017 report has been particularly influential. The content produced by SSI is well regarded, and SSI benefited from a timely embracing of the power and equity framing. All of this contributed to field building.

SSI is known for being a front-runner and early player among its constituents, and is viewed as a leader by those who are familiar with the Initiative. Bibliographic research (see Gemski (2023)) showed that the Initiative's first report, *Scaling Solutions toward Shifting Systems*, published in 2017, is the most quoted of all SSI publications. The report is quoted in publications including *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, *Alliance Magazine*, *Journal of Asian Public Policy*, and *Sustainability*. It is also quoted in publications produced by a variety of organizations, including Ashoka, Catalyst 2030, Echoing Green, Schwab Foundation for Social Entrepreneurship, Co-Impact, Skoll Foundation, McKinsey & Company, System IQ, Spring Impact, and Bounce Beyond.

While the bibliographic search did not lead to as many direct references in publications as expected, the Initiative itself, RPA, and the Initiative's leadership are referenced in many blog posts and are identified as innovators.

The *Scaling Solutions* report contributed to philanthropy embracing systems change. This can be credited to the credibility and diversity of stakeholders involved. The reputation of RPA's and SSI's funders played a key role in influencing peers, and as such their early reports contributed to building the field.

*When the research that SSI conducted and the reports came out, it contributed to creating a more permissible environment to take risks, to do systems work. [...] When you have external validators saying "we looked around, we interviewed people and here's what we found," it goes beyond one organization or individual saying "I believe in this, I think this is good." And there were a few people, not only SSI, who contributed to this. But they were one of the voices that was really important to lay the groundwork and de-risk trying this approach. It didn't take all the risk out, but it took a lot of that risk out. It also changed the dynamics: it became a risk not to do it. Because now we can't say, "oh, it wasn't just these few voices on this specific team pushing for this." There's actually a bunch of external voices saying that this is what needs to happen. It was also not just other philanthropies. It was stakeholders and grantees and so on saying this. The case studies, and the other interviews, were incredibly powerful in that way.*

*SSI was definitely a part of creating the conditions that made the shift to a systems change approach more likely within philanthropy. And it wasn't just the sort of de-risking for others to take it on, or creating the general environment it was also provided more specific ways to implement the approach. Again, I can't draw a one to one, but I can say, what's been happening within organizations is consistent with most of these recommendations.*

.....  
Rob Ricigliano,  
The Omidyar Group Services

<sup>18</sup> Godeke et al, *Philanthropy's New Passing Gear: Mission-Related Investing—A Policy and Implementation Guide for Foundation Trustees*, 2008; Godeke et al, *Solutions for Impact Investors: From Strategy to Implementation*, 2009.

SSI's Power and Equity Workshop Series came at a time of convergence between conversations of systems change and racial, climate, and social justice, following the murder of George Floyd in 2020 and the movement for racial justice. This was also a time of growing awareness of the climate crisis. Funders who took part in the series have described it as very timely, and one of them mentioned that RPA embracing this convergence contributed to creating an environment that was supportive of deep institutional change.

## ENGAGEMENT LIMITATIONS

**Engagement and partnership strategies have not entirely borne fruit, which has limited the impact of the Initiative.**

SSI has proven to have a huge convening power, but with limited repeat engagement over time. Events and workshops tend to target and reach different foundations and staff in each instance. By 2021, less than 10% of all the funders' staff who attended events of the Initiative attended more than one event; the rate was 12% for intermediaries. Staff of organizations headquartered in the US were more likely to attend several events for both intermediaries and funders, even when not counting staff of SG members.

A webcrawl analysis<sup>19</sup> revealed that RPA, SSI<sup>20</sup>, and SG members form a moderately connected network online, finding that "[a]ny efforts to connect to each other have been only modestly successful. However, there does seem to be a significant connection with media and communications sites." Looking deeper at the connectedness within the network created by RPA, its SG members, and key SC initiatives or organizations, such as Illuminate, Co-Impact, or Bridgespan, RPA is the 7th most connected,

with 233 connections. "Considering the size and work of the organization and, in comparison to the Skoll behemoth (1975 connections), this is a respectable placement" (Waddell, 2023).

The Initiative revised its engagement and partnership strategy in 2021. The focus was expanded from primarily individual foundations to include engagement with more philanthropic networks, such as the Africa Philanthropy Network and the Omidyar Group. It also planned collaborations with systems thinking initiatives led by others, such as the Investors for Change course with the School for Systems Change, hosted by the Forum for the Future. These did not fully materialize, however, and we posit that this is due to a reactive approach to partnerships. For example, efforts of the Initiative to engage with African philanthropic stakeholders, through philanthropic networks like the African Philanthropy Forum (APF) are not reflected virtually.

More considerations about what being a strategic partner of SSI means are needed moving forward. Note that some partners identify RPA as a generous partner that shares its connections, but not necessarily as a partner of the Initiative itself, which raises questions about its identity and its ability to be recognized from a partnership standpoint.

<sup>19</sup> The drawing of maps that reflect connections between websites.

<sup>20</sup> The SSI page is not well connected to other members of the online network, but that is in part a reflection of the change in name and related URL of the Initiative in 2021.

Systems change work requires collaboration. At a time where there are more and more actors in the field, strengthening partnership solidarity is critical to amplify each other's voices, play to one another's strengths, and carry on pushing for quality funding.

*I think for anyone who says that what RPA is doing shouldn't continue is wrong. It should continue. My core messages are just: it's going to take a long time. We need as many people there as possible and to collaborate much, much more.*

Jeroo Billimoria,  
Catalyst 2030

SSI has the credibility to communicate directly with donors. Partnering with other organizations could help build more bridges between different parts of philanthropy.

These findings also highlight how the communication strategy needs to be strengthened to better support engagement and partnership. Moving forward, "given the importance of websites' hyperlinks in connecting communities in different organizations, how to generate these deserves more attention. For example, it could be a commitment written into collaboration agreements" (Waddell, 2023).

## TACTICAL EFFECTIVENESS

**SG members and SSI staff have different hypotheses on how to bring about change in philanthropy, as well as for whom this change would be carried out, creating a pull to engage in too many non-complementary tactics.**

Although not explicitly formulated by SSI, the activities deployed by the Initiative reflect six core hypotheses on what brings philanthropic organizations and their staff members to change their behaviors:

1. **Knowledge generation:** being exposed to learning and communication products, which are often text-based (reports, guidelines, case studies, blogs, podcasts, tools, etc.).
2. **Experiential learning:** taking part in facilitated, in-person or virtual spaces where they can put concepts and tools of systems change to work within their individual contexts and have personal realizations ("aha" moments) that will change the perspective they take to their work.
3. **Peer-to-peer influencing:** being exposed to the values, experiences and perspectives of first adopters found among their peers.
4. **Network building and convening for collaboration:** being better connected with one another and collaborating towards common goals.
5. **Engaging the whole system:** taking part in a space for dialogue and collaboration convened to address a systemic challenge facing the main stakeholders in a given system.
6. **Learning and Innovation community:** being part of a community of learners and innovators that support each other in their respective journeys.



Different SG members and RPA staff consider a combination of these tactics as critical to making change happen in philanthropy. This divergence, alongside a responsive approach to opportunities, has led to a combination of activities being implemented over time.

Another key underlying question is, “Who is the Initiative targeting?” (i.e., which institution and who within each institution). There were different assumptions on this question of targeting, as well:

**Assumption 1:** New and emergent philanthropy would be quicker to change and embrace different funding modalities, given that their ways of working are not fully institutionalized.

This explains the Initiative’s efforts to reach emergent philanthropy in different geographies. Co-Impact’s research showed, however, that newer funders tend to start their work vertically, and with more risk aversion<sup>21</sup>. Conversely, Dasra’s most recent research also flags that two cohorts of Indian philanthropy are playing a key role in reshaping it:

***Now-Gen givers, who are professionals and entrepreneurs with first-generation wealth, and Inter-Generational givers, which includes the current generation of traditional family philanthropists, are transforming giving by looking beyond historical funding preferences and beginning to focus on underrepresented causes. [...] Most of these Inter-Gen and Now-Gen givers are open to adopting catalytic ways of giving: [a] willingness to share insights, unrestricted funding, and collaborative funding<sup>22</sup>.***

This shows that this assumption around engaging new and emergent philanthropy needs to be refined and nuanced, and the targeting of the Initiative revised accordingly.

**Assumption 2:** In the usually hierarchical environment that characterizes private foundations, change needs to come from the top.

The large convenings that SSI organized for UNGA and SWF, for example, did indeed attract top leadership and senior management (CEOs, directors, etc.) and some board members, albeit the latter more rarely<sup>23</sup>. Top leadership also attended some workshops, such as the 2019 Assessing Systems Change Workshop.

The Power & Equity Workshop Series, although not as well-attended as expected, did manage to bring together a cohort of staff from the top leadership and senior management levels. The Initiative is also currently working on a guide targeting board members and executive leadership interested in facilitating equitable systems change. This focus on top leadership and board members seems critical. While a growing number of staff within philanthropy are challenging the status quo, interviewees regularly identify boards as a barrier to the adoption of systems change practices.

*I am witnessing a revolution among foundation staff, which is exciting. Staff members are actively challenging the status quo, questioning their boards, being accountable, and acknowledging the ways in which their foundation uses and exerts its power. In some cases, this unaccounted power has created harm which many staff are now naming and are working to shift that harm towards healing. Unfortunately, many of them encounter bottlenecks due to the often rigid structures of boards themselves, and not just the members, so there is still work to be done for true transformation. Nonetheless, this is a hopeful sign.*

.....  
Kézha Hatier-Riess,  
Global Greengrants Fund

<sup>21</sup> Co-Impact, *Promoting Higher-Impact Philanthropy: What We’ve Learned*, 2021.

<sup>22</sup> Sheth, *India Philanthropy Report*, 2023.

<sup>23</sup> Note that the data on which this is based is imperfect, as information on job titles is missing for a large part of attendees.

Boards often hang on to a certain vision of change, and methods for measuring it, that are not compatible with the deeper paradigm shift needed to bring about systems change. In some foundations, board members' fixed terms also present specific challenges, as board members keep changing, which requires accompanying them on this deeper paradigm shift as they rotate. For foundations, this situation does present opportunities, however, in terms of bringing perspectives that would support this paradigm shift. This invites the Initiative to think about how to target board members further and, based on our interviews, we suspect SSI is particularly well-positioned to reach this audience, given the credibility of the RPA name as well as those of the participating funders.

**The diversity of assumptions, often unspoken, among SSI members led to a broad range of tactics, with mixed results.**

We posit that trying to respond to the different hypotheses at the SG level led to too many scattered tactics that a) weren't mutually reinforcing and b) were beyond the capacity of the team (including SG members) to fully implement well, and as such led to mixed results. Below we synthesize feedback on the effectiveness of each tactic individually.

Note: the evaluation did not reveal dispositive conclusions about which tactics were more effective than others<sup>24</sup>. Rather, it helped uncover how different tactics contributed to different kinds of changes under different conditions.

## 1. Knowledge generation

**Activities organized by SSI:** content (case studies, reports, blog posts) and tools (self-diagnosis tool) developed by SSI itself, or the sharing of tools developed by others through workshops.

We found evidence that some of the content created by SSI has been used, **mainly by people and institutions already on a systems change journey**, to convince others internally, build the case with funders, or grow momentum in philanthropy.

*We are familiar with SSI and [their] approach. SSI and some readings on the topic of systems change helped us while setting up the 10to19 Adolescents Collaborative in India. When we were developing our strategy there was pressure on us to quickly begin implementation and work on the ground. Some learnings from the material that we read, especially the aspect from SSI that reinforced the point that ensuring a Collaborative Model is poised for success requires a deliberate and intentional investment of 1-1.5 years, was valuable. This kind of literature helped us in setting expectations with our stakeholders and gave us the time to galvanize funding aligned to outcomes.*

.....  
Regranter staff

While the case studies contributed to field-building as mentioned above, another assumption behind their publication was that it would give visibility to organizations already working on systems change and lead to more funding being directed to them. Although we were not able to systematically assess changes in actual funding patterns, we find little evidence that this occurred. One interviewee highlighted that while there were a few instances of people reaching out to them following the publication of a case study, that this did not translate into funding or anything else.

<sup>24</sup> This is in part because the tactics were aimed at triggering different changes with different kinds of audiences. Thus we could not assess them comparatively.



Overall, the **quality of SSI resources is recognized and referenced, except for the [self-diagnosis tool](#), for which there is little evidence of use.** The latest report, [Shifting Power to Shift Systems: insights and tools for funders](#) is a good representation of current progressive thinking in philanthropy and has been appreciated.

However, the philanthropic ecosystem is currently **overloaded with content**, and stakeholders also flag the need to go beyond publishing reports (see below). This raises the question of whether SSI is best suited to create content, or to share and promote content developed by others. In fact, Monitoring Evaluation and Learning (MEL) resources or system mapping developed by other institutions or initiatives and shared in the workshops have been appreciated and used, such as material shared by Spring Impact in Kenya in the July 2019 workshop, Scaling Impact toward Systems Change: Exploring Good Health for All in Kenya. This also raises questions around whose content to value and promote, in an acknowledgement of the politics of knowledge production in philanthropy.

Individual learning about systems change alone is not enough and could feed into technocratic, easy-fix tendencies (see Table 2 below).

## 2. Experiential learning

**Activities organized by SSI:** events and workshops.

We found evidence that some of the workshops organized by the Initiative have created the conditions for participants to have “aha moments” that in turn led to further shifts for individuals or foundations already on a systems change journey. The 2019 [Assessing Systems Change workshop](#) seems to have created the conditions for such realizations to happen, and some participants were able to influence strategy processes in their own organizations, or change their grant-making practices. the case with funders, or grow momentum in philanthropy.

*That workshop in 2019 was a huge milestone for us. I could say we made a 180-degree change, from the focus of the initiatives we support, the roles we play in the systems, the way we measured our impact, even the way we understand the system. [...] Before the workshop, we began to talk to peers and to learn about system change from key stakeholders, and one of them was RPA. And we attended the Assessing Systems Change workshop, where we presented a map that we, the staff of the foundation, had made. [...] We were there to learn about the assessment of systemic change, so that we can figure out how to assess outcomes.*

*What we understood in that workshop was that our map was missing a key component: the different perspectives of diverse stakeholders. And that is key to these systemic approaches. And that is not happening in other foundations. So in our case, we realized that we had only a partial understanding of the system with the map we built. And that if we really wanted to understand the system we are trying to influence, it was absolutely essential to integrate diverse stakeholders, and not only to share with them our map to see whether it makes sense for them in the traditional way, but to make them part of the mapping process from the beginning. So in 2020, we restarted the process.*

---

Maria Claudia Santos,  
Arturo Sesana Foundation

While individual-level realizations are key to bringing about change, these alone are not enough, given organization politics, structures, and policies. Foundations are complex organizational systems themselves and as such are difficult to change. Translating learning into action requires influence at multiple levels of action and power, perhaps most importantly among boards and C-suite leadership. Once members of staff are convinced and able to change their practices, boards often need to be brought along in order for wider and deeper changes to take place. Participants in these workshops need to have access to strategic spaces and to their boards, they sometimes need to put things in place to bring the board along.

### 3. Peer-to-peer influencing

**Activities organized by SSI:** events, workshops, reports, and case studies.

Initial peer-to-peer influencing in combination with content creation was critical for field building as mentioned above (RPA and SG members' reputation created this opportunity to influence the field through reports and case studies). Peer-to-peer influencing was also a key component to the success of the 2019 [Assessing Systems Change workshop](#).

*The thing that was actually most impactful for me in terms of shifting my own practice was the Assessing Systems Change workshop in the summer of 2019. And it was important, not just for my own practice, but it was important to see how other donors, who were there with me, were themselves approaching these issues.*

.....  
Foundation staff

The 2022 Power and Equity Workshop Series, conceived of as a cohort of 34 institutions engaging in an eight-part series over three months, also provided a space that enabled peer-to-peer influencing. Although not as well-attended as expected, the fact that it was a relatively small group actually enabled the **sharing of experiences and peer-to-peer learning**. This was facilitated by the inputs of very highly-regarded speakers. One participant highlighted the quality of both the content and the space created, noting that it felt very special to have time with top speakers and experts, as well as space to share experiences, and expressed interest in staying in touch as a cohort. Another participant highlighted that the space provided **peer support for those already interested in grappling with questions of power and equity in philanthropy**. That contributed to them bringing about deeper changes in their institution.

Peer-to-peer influencing presents the risk of creating an echo chamber, with distorted views on the rationale for and nature of equitable systems change, i.e., the kinds of shifts needed. We elaborate on this in Table 2.

### 4. Network building and convening for collaboration

**Activities organized by SSI:** workshops and strategic partnerships, the convening of a task team on return-seeking capital.

Building connections and creating spaces for collaborations have been critical, and really appreciated by participants in workshops and workshop co-organizers. This was the case for the 2019 [Assessing Systems Change workshop](#), which led to funding for one organization (and a change in reporting practice for that funder over the years) as well as the forming of new connections around impact investing. For example, in China, the workshop led to building philanthropic infrastructure (with funds being made available for that). Overall, by connecting

national stakeholders (in philanthropy, the private sector, and CSOs) in different geographies and US-based large foundations, these workshops create new opportunities for funding (or opportunities to strengthen existing funding). However, these opportunities have been hampered by the COVID-19 pandemic.

*I think it also brought together some really interesting, diverse global partners, who came to Kenya. This was also catalytic, because it allowed for greater value in additional and organic bilateral or multilateral partnerships emerging and discussions happening on the fringes of this workshop. Because automatically what happens is that a local or global partner will say “Oh, it’s great to meet you. And, we’ve got this project, and can we work with you?” So, it creates a greater multiplier effect, which is quite a powerful vector as well.*

.....  
Intermediary staff

The third task team of SSI, focused on return-seeking capital, intentionally brought in members that were not involved in the rest of the Initiative. As a result, the created space also fostered opportunities for networking.

## 5. Engaging the whole system

**Activities organized by SSI:** workshops in Brazil, Colombia, India, and Kenya.

The workshops that SSI co-organized in Colombia, India, and Kenya were focused on bringing together stakeholders working on a specific topic, adopting the following systemic approaches:

- ▶ Gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls in India
- ▶ Advancing health and wellbeing in Kenya
- ▶ Addressing the equity gap in rural Colombia.

The workshop co-organized in Brazil was not focused on a specific topic but brought a variety of stakeholders together, consistent with the whole-system approach, including philanthropic institutions, international organizations, and civil society organizations.

Overall, the workshops were appreciated but the momentum created was hampered by COVID-19. A key feedback finding was that a more diverse group of stakeholders would have been desirable (including government stakeholders, more activists, and more community members). Looking ahead, the democratic rollback experienced globally, will be a challenge to this approach and to systems change work more broadly.

## Box 2 //

### **Spotlight on feedback from workshop participants and organizing partners in Colombia, Brazil, India, China, and Kenya:**

In 2019 and early 2020, SSI co-organized workshops in Colombia, Brazil, India, China and Kenya. These workshops were co-organized in partnership with the Association of Family and Corporate Foundations, the UN Development Program Brazil, Ashoka University, the Nerada Foundation, the China Foundation Forum, and the SDG Partnership Platform Kenya.

These workshops were appreciated by participants as they enabled connections among participants. In Kenya, the complementarity of North-South participants was highlighted as a way to potentially foster new partnerships in the margin of these workshops. In India, the workshop contributed to wider conversations around systems change and some initial changes in practices (see Box 1, Section 2.1). In Colombia, the connections built in this workshop helped domestic philanthropy groups self-organize, and as a result they were better coordinated when COVID-19 hit. The workshops also provided new opportunities to share different ideas and for organizations to move along the continuum from traditional grant-making to impact investment. Other good outcomes included the examination of actors and investors along the entire supply chain of different industries and encouraging closer collaboration with private sector actors.

Aside from these networking opportunities, participants highlighted that some of the resources shared by SSI or by invited speakers, such as Spring Impact in Kenya, were particularly useful. These included frameworks for systemic analysis,

such as the iceberg model, and frameworks related to impact tracking. Some particular messages also resonated, such as the importance of collaboration and working across silos within a given organization.

All participants highlighted that COVID-19 hampered the dynamic that was created with these workshops and prevented the system change conversation from fully blooming, and also slowed down funding opportunities that were created with the workshop.

However, participants and partners highlighted that a more diverse group of stakeholders would be needed moving forward, in order to better reflect the system as a whole. In particular, the events should purposefully include activists and community members as they are often left out of these spaces. There is an opportunity here to create spaces where activists can voice their frustration and community members can speak for themselves, while avoiding reproducing extractive dynamics, the exhaustion of activists, and meanwhile enabling genuine participation. This would require pushing funders to do the work ahead of time and show up in these spaces with humility and self-awareness. On the other hand, more decision-makers could also be included in these spaces as a way to enable change.

Finally, some participants highlight the lack of government stakeholders, though some consider them critical for systems change approaches.

## 6. Learning and Innovation community

**Activities organized by SSI:** SG, task teams, the Power & Equity workshop series (to some extent).

In its current phase, SSI has been organized around four task teams<sup>25</sup> and an SG. Each of these meet monthly and were designed to run the Initiative. These have, at times, demonstrated the qualities of a learning community. While appreciated, purpose and process will need to be strengthened for these spaces to realize their full potential and act as learning and innovation communities.

As mentioned above, the task team focus on return-seeking capital was intentionally designed to bring in members that were not involved in the rest of the Initiative. While it was not possible for every member to attend every monthly meeting, the consistency of the regular, one-hour monthly call and its participants provided a valuable space for learning. Participants appreciated having a space for open-ended discussions, and that enabled them to reflect, listen, and learn from one another and adjust their own practice.

At times, the SG and another task team have provided a similar learning space. The SG monthly meeting sometimes provides a space for reflection and learning, hosting a range of perspectives, and it is the kind of space that some of its members do not often have access to. At the time of the preparation of the Power and Equity Workshop Series, the task team monthly meeting space

allowed for conversations about power dynamics in philanthropy and their root causes, as well as the sharing of individual learnings. These were made possible by the openness of participants to learn and change. We also posit that trust among participants played an important role.

The example of the return-seeking capital task team highlights the possibilities offered by alignment with RPA's core mission and advisory service. RPA's reputation in impact investing, its network, and RPA's advisor's direct involvement enabled RPA to bring along external collaborators to foster this learning and connecting space, as the work of SSI was weaved into the advisory service work. Moving forward, more clarity on the purpose of the cohort would be needed, however. Should it primarily be a learning space for its participants? Should the group work towards sharing the learning externally, and how? If so, what needs to be put in place to allow it?

Finally, the peer-to-peer learning and peer support mentioned above and created through the Power and Equity Workshop Series, suggest that this space presented some of the qualities that would be needed for a learning community. We posit that on top of the quality and skills of the speakers and facilitators, its size, as well as the repeated engagement over three months, contributed to this dynamic.



<sup>25</sup> Advancing SSI's Conceptual Work, Influencing Board and C-Suite, Influencing Return-Seeking Capital, and Communications.

## Box 3 //

### Spotlight on feedback from participants and speakers of the Power and Equity Workshop Series

The workshop series was born out of an acknowledgement of the importance of centering equity and power relations in systems change work. This was part of RPA's response to hearing this feedback more and more through their networks, particularly following the murder of George Floyd in 2020 and the subsequent racial justice reckoning. To take it further, participants and speakers highlighted the following possible efforts:

- ▶ Consider putting in place a way for participants to stay connected.
- ▶ Consider ways for participants to commit to bring about changes in their own institutions and how to accompany them to do so.
- ▶ Consider going deeper into topics such as the decolonization of philanthropy, or intersectionality, a concept rooted in black feminist activism and scholarship.
- ▶ Consider spotlighting Global South thinkers, practitioners, and activists on these topics, as a way to be less US-centric.

Creating a community indeed takes repeated engagement and, as mentioned above, this has not been core to SSI's convening approach. It also takes consistency and purposeful facilitation (see Table 2).

Overall, the activities organized by SSI have not really yet tackled the deeper levers of systems

change, like norms, power relations, and mental models, and while the latest workshop series marked a welcomed and appreciated shift for the Initiative, we elaborate below on what it would take to go deeper (see next section, Section 2.3, on learning considerations).



## SSI'S STRATEGIC PURPOSE

**SG members hold a range of perspectives on the Initiative's purpose and niche, and RPA, like many funder collaborative managers, navigates this tension in part by aligning their work around the areas of easiest agreement. These areas also tend to be less transformational.**

Stakeholders involved in the Initiative have different perspectives on the purpose of the Initiative. These differences reflect the various ethos of the institutions represented in the SG, as well as different assumptions about how systems change happens, as described in the section above. These range from shifting philanthropy towards more equitable grantee-centric grantmaking, to leveraging funding for social innovators, or creating the conditions for large-scale change that would shift an entire system. The team coalesces around the idea that funders' practices need to change to be more grantee-centric and to provide longer-term funding.

The initial name choice, and the name change in 2021 to emphasize the focus on systems change, illustrates the evolution of the various ideas that SG members hold about which changes to philanthropic behavior will best enable systems change, with a back and forth between the focus on identifying solutions that need scaling, on the one hand (and thus changes to the system to enable scaling), and a focus on the direct target of changing systems, on the other hand.

We posit that this tension leads to a strategy that represents a "lowest common denominator" of approach, as it depends on finding an approach that can be agreed upon among all SG members,

with their different theories and assumptions. This approach must also be aligned with RPA's own strategy, and still accommodate SSI leadership's understanding of what is needed in philanthropy. Other evaluations of funder collaborations often point out this phenomenon, where staff are required to negotiate strategies so that they are responsive to a range of funders. What is less common is that funders would take the time to develop a collective vision of how change would happen to achieve shared goals, as it has been the case in SSI. This adds another layer of complexity to the strategy process and in this case has resulted in a loose alignment around the focus of the strategy: Is peer-to-peer learning influencing the core of the strategy? Or is it about creating conditions for cross-sector dialogue, diagnosis, and collaboration? This also results in a multiplication of tactics, often going in different directions, as mentioned above, and there is growing recognition among SG members that this is limiting.

**A call to be bolder, in both purpose and tactical choices**

Conservative philanthropy is well-organized, has a long-view lens and wields significant resources. This was highlighted by several interviewees, and also came up in a conversation around power and equity that was held as part of this process (see Annex I). Research from the Global Philanthropy Project, for example, highlighted the volume of funding that is funneled towards the anti-gender movement<sup>26</sup>. There is an implicit agreement in SSI that systems change work contributes to a better world, but no explicit stance on what that world

<sup>26</sup> Global Philanthropy Project, *Meet the Moment*, 2020.

looks like, although the latest report articulates “a vision of society based on global solidarity and distributed leadership.”<sup>27</sup> This is not unique to SSI, and is rather a reflection of the wider philanthropic field, as an interviewee highlighted:

*I don't sense that there is a very aggressive vision about a new future. The philanthropic community still talks about things internally, within their own orbit, generally, about how we are going to create pools of funds, or how we are going to align our investment activities to reflect our values. And that's really not a very aggressive picture of a future that we need. I think that they have got to face the fact that they are part of a financial system. And to think of themselves, not in this sort of nice, parallel system, but they are part of it. And their money makes them part of it. And I don't think they are thinking very creatively or aggressively about that. They are still working around the edges about how we work with government financing. I don't see a big picture, an aggressive vision of the future.*

.....  
Steve Waddell,  
Bounce Beyond

It is interesting to note, however, that a network like Confluence Philanthropy<sup>28</sup> a network launched in 2009 and focused on investing, whose members are private, public and community foundations, family offices, individual donors—is moving away from “impact investing” and towards “values-aligned investing,” and articulates its mission around values of sustainability, justice, and equity.

This uncertainty in purpose affects the ability of the team to decide its emphasis. Articulating that purpose, at least internally, would sharpen the strategic focus and tactics of the Initiative: how is SSI influencing funders to bring about a different world? What does that world look like?

This all comes back to how systems change is understood and embraced by the Initiative. A stance on systems change that aims at the more transformative, “below the waterline” dimensions of a system, such as power and mindsets, would likely require both different strategies and different partnerships than one that takes aim at smaller scale policy and practice changes. Interviewees also highlight that there is already resistance (see Section 2.1), and that this is to be expected when stronger stances are taken.

*Beyond an initiative like the SSI, you have RPA and other philanthropy influencers like Bridgespan with their fingers in all these pots. Could there be [a] coalescing towards a shared vision of a sustainable and just human future? What would it take to get there? And how might each funder and their network play a role? I think this sort of coordination could go a long way towards healing the systems that we depend on but are quickly unraveling. However, this sort of approach is risky as it would require us to have a political perspective, which I think many in progressive institutional philanthropy shy away from, but, interestingly, our conservative counterparts do not.*

.....  
Gurpreet Singh,  
Roddenberry Foundation

Philanthropy is indeed an outgrowth of the very structures—capitalism, colonialism, and white supremacy—that are responsible for the combined crises we are all experiencing. These same crises are now demanding bolder, more effective responses, and thus opening up new imaginative spaces. Philanthropy, or an initiative like SSI, can not be expected to articulate the outcome of system transformation, but they can help open up spaces for imagination and responsibly support those who are already doing the work (see Annex I).

<sup>27</sup> SSI & RPA, *Shifting Power to Shift Systems: Insights and Tools for Funders*, 2022.

<sup>28</sup> See Confluence Philanthropy, *The Trouble With Impact Investing*, <https://www.confluencephilanthropy.org/The-Trouble-With-Impact-Investing>.



## 2.3.//

### Learning considerations

#### A REFLECTION ON SSI TACTICS

By evaluating the effectiveness of SSI's tactics and examining how the field of systems change has evolved, we can learn more about the conditions under which each of these tactics can be more effective and which ones are appropriate to influence philanthropic behavior.

► **Table 2**

#### LEARNING CONSIDERATIONS ON TACTICS

##### TACTIC

##### 1 Knowledge generation

Production and/or dissemination of (often written) learning and communication products (reports, guidelines, case studies, blogs, podcasts, tools, etc.) to promote concepts and practices of systems change as applied to philanthropic giving.

##### LEARNING CONSIDERATIONS

- The introduction of concepts, frameworks, tools, and examples are particularly helpful at the early stages of the field of practice, as a way to define concepts that are new in that field and increase the salience of that body of work.
- As the field develops, practitioners are more interested in how to apply these concepts and tools to their unique situations. At this stage of maturity in the field, rather than more tools and guidance, it appears to be time for summative, comparative, and critical reviews of the existing body of work.
- To produce cutting-edge content, invite contributions from front-line experts who are advancing theory and practice in the field. These could be found among practitioners, activists, innovators, community organizers, designers, artists, academics, etc., all of whom bring a variety of skills, backgrounds, experiences, and mindsets to this work.
- Tools, frameworks, and guides can provide an entry point to generate interest in the field of practice, but these alone do not lead to changes in mental model or behavior. A combination of other tactics will be required for that, particularly experiential learning and sustained engagement.
- If not used in conjunction with change strategies that target deeper levels of change (i.e., attitudes, beliefs, and mental models), tools and guides risk "technocratizing" the work and exacerbating power disparities by reducing accessibility for audiences less familiar with concepts and language drawn from Western scholarship. Overemphasis on tools and frameworks that recognize certain ideas and concepts but do not go further to influence practice and behaviors can unintentionally act as a pressure release valve. This means that by making small adjustments, these tools and theoretical frames could make marginal changes rather than pursuing paradigm shift, and thus they end up keeping the current system of philanthropy in place, despite pressure for deeper, more transformative change.

## 2 Experiential learning

Facilitated, in-person or virtual spaces where participants can put concepts and tools of systems change to work within their individual contexts and have personal realizations (“aha” moments) that will change the perspective they take to their work.

- One-off experiential learning opportunities can spark curiosity and interest, but do not sustain change at deeper levels. Changing attitudes and mental models requires building a new muscle memory, and this requires repeated engagement, consistency, and close accompaniment.
- Experiential learning opportunities can lead to action if there is already interest and motivation in individual participants. The chances of participants taking action after experiential learning experiences increase if they are not alone, and if they are supported by an external community or find allies in their organizations who they can join forces with.
- Participants who want to change their organizations internally will be constrained by the visible and invisible power structures, the culture, and prevailing mental models in their organizations. Unless they are structurally well-positioned to move the work forward, and receive sufficient support from leadership, they will need to be very creative to bring about internal change. In particular, intentional strategies will be needed to bring boards along.
- Experiential learning on systems change work does not lead to deeper change unless there is a new insight about one’s personal role in the work at hand and a better understanding of the structural, historic, and systemic dynamics at play.

## 3 Peer-to-peer influencing

Leveraging values, experiences, and perspectives of some first adopters to influence the practices of their peers.

- Funders care about what other funders do and think, and like to discuss challenges with their peers and seek their views.
- Research based on existing scholarship offers a “Four E’s” heuristic<sup>29</sup> to identify recurring elements of successful funder-influencing initiatives: evidence for case making, engagement among leaders with like-minded collaborators, examples of success to inspire, and easing adoption with dedicated staff and resources.
- Peer-to-peer learning and influence seems to work at its best when there is mutual trust, respect, and recognition. This requires a safe, non-competitive, and collegial space.
- There are some risks associated with focusing exclusively on peer spaces, including group think; reinforcing own-existing mental models; and working out of a poor/biased diagnosis of how the system is really operating and how change happens. Inviting diverse perspectives and experiences to this peer-learning space can mitigate these risks.
- This approach might require careful targeting (i.e., C-suites and boards prefer to learn from others in their position or with that experience).

<sup>29</sup> Reich, et al, *What it Really Takes to Influence Funder Practice*, 2019.

#### 4 Network building and convening for collaboration

Increasing the connectivity of the philanthropic ecosystem by playing a brokering and convening role, so that actors in the field can better connect with one another and collaborate in pursuit of common goals.

- Isolated, one-off events can seed initial connections, but these are best sustained and strengthened by a medium-term process.
- This very systemic practice of helping actors within the system to connect and self-organize requires a network weaver/connector function. All members of the network can become weavers.
- Collaboration can happen organically but it's more effective when there is supportive infrastructure to support the process.
- Transformation catalysts can accelerate collaboration for transformation in a given system by amplifying, connecting, and cohering<sup>30</sup>.
- Collaborative spaces thrive with diverse perspectives and skills, and do best when they are multidisciplinary or transdisciplinary, which helps avoid siloed and narrow approaches to systemic challenges.
- Collaborating with actors whose values and perspectives are different might be necessary when pursuing systemic solutions to wicked or complex problems. This might require stretched collaboration practices.

#### 5 Engaging the whole systemcollaboration

Convening representatives of the main stakeholders in the system and providing a space for dialogue and collaboration to address a systemic challenge.

- The underlying assumption is that to address systemic issues a systemic response is needed.
- This does not require total alignment on values and perspectives from all parties, but some degree of discomfort with the current state of play and interest to move beyond the current status quo.
- Crucial to acknowledge and level power dynamics at play, so the space does not reproduce the same systemic power imbalances that dominate outside the room. That requires people and/or institutions in positions of power to come to the space with humility and self-awareness, and for careful facilitation, in order to manage the dynamics affecting those relationships. This also requires intentional reaching out and creating the conditions for meaningful participation of organizations or historically marginalized community members (see Box 2).

<sup>30</sup> Waddell et al, *Transformation Systems for Socioeconomic Transition*, 2022.

- Conveners and facilitators need to be very careful not to capture the space by over-framing or over-directing the process. Instead, facilitators could ensure that activists, organizations, or community members from historically marginalized communities are given space to express their thoughts and exert influence on their own terms (see Box 4). That would require careful preparation beforehand.
- Risk: if motivation for change is low, those actors who are motivated to collaborate and work towards systems change might feel overwhelmed with a heavy burden. In that case it might be necessary to pivot towards other tactics so that early adopters are supported in finding other ways forward.

## 6 Learning and innovation community

Convening and curating an active community of learners and innovators that support each other in their respective journeys.

- When translating concepts, methods, and tools into practice, a supportive community helps deepen individual practice and advance the field.
- A learning community can also be a space for peer-to-peer learning through sharing experience, hearing directly from a diverse range of stakeholders, and through work with activists in particular. This can enable identifying common bottlenecks and finding collective solutions. The Funder Learning and Action Co-lab (FLAC) on gender, environmental, and climate justice, initially named the Funder Learning Community for Women and the Environment (FLC) and initiated by Global Greengrants Funds and PROSPERA, provides a successful example of such a community.
- This requires building an identity as a community and a clear, co-created common purpose.
- This process needs to be sustained over time with facilitation and documentation of the learning journey.
- A takeaway from Systems Understanding for Social Impact (SUSI), a successful learning initiative on systems, was that the equity conversation was the most transformational.

In addition to the tactics used by SSI, presented in the table above, from a learning perspective there is an additional tactic worth discussing: **creating opportunities for philanthropists to listen to grantees**, and making space for the latter to speak candidly.

This tactic was not intentionally used by SSI but has been suggested by some evaluation participants and has been used by other initiatives directed at influencing funder behavior. Some interviewees reflected that within their own foundations or networks, hearing directly from grantee partners is a powerful route to philanthropists' behavior change.

Listening to grantee experiences can provide a strong reality check for many funders and challenge their understanding and assumptions around the experience of grantees and the type of change needed to bring about transformation. As such, funders would gain a more accurate understanding of what civil society needs from philanthropy by doing deep listening and engaging openly with actors who are doing deep, transformative systems change work. Given the power dynamics at play, a dedicated facilitator might be required to create a safe, brave and honest space for candid conversations, similar to what we present in the table above under Tactic 5. It will also require sustainable funding for organizations and activists doing this work (see Box 4 and Annex I).

## WHAT WOULD IT TAKE TO MOVE THE SECTOR TOWARDS TRANSFORMATIVE SYSTEMS CHANGE?

As mentioned in Section 2.1, key stakeholders working to change systems argue that incremental shifts are easily captured by the current logic of the institutional system they are trying to change. For example, processes for "diagnosing the system" as a part of strategy design quickly become yet another landscape scan, part of a bureaucratic process often outsourced to a consultant that generally fails to reveal deeper dynamics at play. Unrestricted funding can free up grantees to work with more agency and agility, but if this funding flows to the usual suspects, it is unlikely

to support a shift in the power and governance norms that drive how a system works. Therefore, while smaller-scale practice shifts may be an entry point to change, evaluation findings suggest that many foundations get stuck at this stage, or even back-slide away from more transformative shifts.

Several interviewees offered a different diagnosis of the problem and had their own hypotheses about what it will take to move the sector beyond rhetoric and into action for transformative systems change. Their perspectives are rooted in the following diagnosis:

***The persistent gap between language and action on systems change is not a skills, concepts, frameworks, or evidence problem. Rather, it is a mental models, power, and relationships problem.***

This diagnosis invites SSI to consider not only how innovations in practice spread across the sector, but also what it really takes to unstick deeper mental models. What would it look like to work more directly on the deeper levels of the iceberg, those aspects of the system that keep philanthropic behaviors locked in place? Analyzing the interviews, we synthesized two interrelated propositions that could help SSI close the gap between language and action.

### PROPOSITION 1

**Philanthropic actors need transformational learning processes to unlearn existing mental models.**

Interviewees focused on transformative work outside the philanthropic sector suggested that individuals at all levels of philanthropy, but particularly boards and leadership, need experiences that help them see and critically assess the deep underlying assumptions that frame their thinking, beliefs and action. These are the "aha" moments in which we understand that our perspectives are not the only ones and some of our most fundamental assumptions have been wrong. More significantly, these interviewees believe that

transformative learning for philanthropy requires not only reassessing assumptions and mental models, but also gaining an understanding of how philanthropic practice (and its financial resources) are currently participating in upholding the same systems that create the outcomes foundations are seeking to change.

Research on transformative learning shows that individuals who undergo cognitive and emotional experiences that don't fit into their current beliefs (i.e., a "disorienting dilemma") and have social support to critically examine past assumptions are more likely to integrate new perspectives into their mental models<sup>31</sup>. Adjustments to practice that are made without this kind of unlearning and relearning are quickly absorbed into existing mental models. SSI's reputation and credibility with philanthropic leaders, combined with its focus on honest, intimate conversations, could be leveraged to create deeper unlearning opportunities that shift mental models.

## PROPOSITION 2

Initiatives that aim to shift philanthropic practice need to look at changing from whom foundations learn and are influenced by, rather than reinforcing the sector's habit of learning predominantly from other foundations and similar peers.

Transformational learning and shifts in mental models cannot occur without deep relationships with people who hold different perspectives, voices, and worldviews. Philanthropy's biases and blind spots are reinforced by the sector's tendency to listen primarily to aligned peers, consultants, and narrow forms of evidence. Additionally, complex systems cannot shift without relationships that enable collective organizing, alignment, and

adaptive learning. Yet even when foundations do learn from and with grantees or other actors, it tends to be on the foundations' terms, with civil society organizations' (CSOs) perspectives gathered as input into the foundation's meaning-making rather than in shared space where a foundation's thinking, diagnosis, and strategies can be contested and negotiated on equal footing by and with other actors. Interviewees suggested that if this pattern is not disrupted, philanthropy will continue to reproduce the dynamics that shape the same systems philanthropy purportedly seeks to change.

Building on wisdom gained through its experiments with cross-sector convenings in Kenya, India, Colombia, and Brazil, SSI might use its convening power and gravitas to shift who funders are listening to and learning from. This could take the form of creating safe and bold spaces for funders to come together for deeper dialogue with civil society actors already engaged in transformative change. Or, rather than standing up its own separate effort to do this, SSI could partner with actors already engaged in this kind of learning to bring additional funders to the table.



<sup>31</sup> Transformative learning is a theory about how transformations of consciousness or fundamental mental models occur. Most often identified with sociologist and adult learning scholar Jack Mezirow, there are several decades of thinking and an emerging body of empirical research associated with it. For example, see Hoggan et al, *Transformative learning theory*, 2023.



## 2.4.//

### What are opportunities for the operational and governance model to be improved?

#### THE NATURE OF SSI

The Shifting Systems Initiative describes itself in documents as a *funder-led initiative of a collaborative nature*. Over time, the Steering Group and funders have included Porticus, Skoll, Ford, Draper Richards Kaplan, and Chandler foundations, and Jasmine Social Investments. Although it could be similar to a funder collaborative, members of the Initiative identify more with the idea of a collective on a learning-to-action journey, implying greater expectations for cross-funder learning and practice change among members and less control from funders than funder collaboratives normally support.

primary role of the Steering Group is to provide guidance, feedback, and recommendations to RPA on the direction and strategy of the Initiative. In addition to strategic steering, SG members also actively contribute to content, participate on panels and events, comment on draft reports and materials, identify speakers and invitees for curated conferences and workshops, and more.

Internal group norms have emerged organically over years of collaboration. Although the Initiative kicked off in 2016 (with its first activities in 2017) the first document describing terms of reference for the SG came in June 2020, emerging from a desire to expand the group, which requires making expectations and norms explicit for prospective members. The task teams have not developed terms of reference for the groups or their members, which at times has created ambiguity and paralysis.

#### GOVERNANCE

In its early years, SSI had an organic approach to governance and decision-making norms that were well-suited to its size and emergent nature. Now, as happens with all collaboratives, it may have reached a developmental phase that requires a different governance model to remain active and keep team members engaged.

Today, the Initiative is organized around two types of groups: a Steering Group (SG) and four task teams. The Steering Group includes contributing funders as well as advisors, close allies, and former SG members who have since transitioned into other organizations but are involved as honorary contributors. New members are usually invited to join when there is an existing relationship of trust with at least one current member of the SG. The



Decision-making ultimately sits with RPA, although in practice this seems to happen by consensus and organically, sometimes during SG calls, sometimes in follow-up bilateral exchanges among members of the SG. As stated in the SG terms of reference, all members

*[...] work together as thought partners, discussing how to best promote the goals of the initiative as well as how the initiative can tackle unmet needs in the sector and push the thinking of the philanthropy field. RPA ultimately makes decisions about the content, scope, and focus of the initiative, but does so with the meaningful engagement and input of the Steering Group.*

Efforts have been made to create a culture of open collaboration. SG members are encouraged to reveal any biases and relationships they have that may influence their recommendations and ideas. The group values its learning orientation, drawing recommendations from experience, constant road-testing, and its co-creative approach.

However, not all members feel equally involved in strategic discussions and decision-making, which is translating into the relative disengagement of some team members. Some wish there was greater visibility and transparency in how decisions are made. Others frequently experience circular conversations without clear conclusions, and highlight that a better-defined process and guardrails could be helpful moving forward.

Also creating unique challenges for forward motion are the structural power dynamics between funders and the RPA team. Conversations inside the SG are inevitably influenced by funders, even if they are committed to empower RPA in its leadership role. Even in a soft way, the intrinsic funder-grantee power dynamics are also reflected in the work, with RPA seeking to be responsive to the funders, their vision, ideas, and cues. This has been partially mitigated by the task teams, where discussions in smaller groups enable the more equitable and relaxed participation of all members.

SG members are expected to prioritize the Initiative's goals alongside those of their own institution. In practice, funders' evolving interests have directly affected SSI's strategy. While this provides fantastic opportunities to amplify and connect efforts within and beyond SSI, it makes it more difficult for RPA (and the SSI itself) to forge a collective identity unique to SSI and distinct from those of individual participating funders. In turn, SSI's influence on participating funders has been less clear, with some SG members championing SSI's approaches and practices in their own organizations.

**A clearer (and renewed) mandate and delineation of roles is needed moving forward.**

With a spirit of collaboration, members of the Initiative have accepted flexible roles, but the group is ready for a clearer delineation of mandates and functions. RPA itself has shown flexibility, at times acting as a facilitator among SG members, or a trusted advisor, or a thought partner to a donor collaborative. At other times, RPA has taken the Initiative forward and shaped an entire area of work aligned to RPA's interests and vision in that space, as a grantee organization. These roles are combined with the provision of operational capacity and the expectation of delivering on a work plan as a contractor or consultant would.

SG members have also played different roles, sometimes combining strategic leadership with substantial responsibility for deliverables and activities, and even contributing operational capacity. While this way of working and fluidity of roles has increased the sense of collective ownership and collaboration, there are not sufficient planning and management mechanisms in place to empower different actors to fully act in the remit of their respective roles. This has at times generated a misalignment of expectations, capacity gaps, substantial delays, and occasionally a sense of improvisation and rush that could have been avoided with better planning.

## STRATEGY

**SSI's current strategy reflects both planned and emergent strategic choices, where different approaches to strategic planning and implementation have been combined.**

In its early stages, SSI's strategy has been purposefully flexible and organic, responding to openings of opportunities and to allow conversations to evolve and mature. This approach has also been highly appreciated by some members of the SG. With time, and without strategic guardrails in place, SSI has suffered some loss in coherence and alignment among its various efforts. Members indicated that there could be opportunities to re-align strategy across the different task teams.

Motivated by this need, the group decided to articulate its theory of change in early 2021. The process was self-facilitated and culminated in a document describing underlying problems that SSI seeks to address, proposed interventions and opportunities, intermediary and long-term outcomes, and target audiences. Most participants found the process necessary but not fully satisfactory, for different reasons. The process revealed some fundamental differences between members which have been held as creative tensions, particularly around how to change behaviors and practices, about how to influence philanthropy, and about what SSI's niche and position in the sector is and should be.

At present, the planned strategy is documented in the theory of change materials, as well as SSI reports, internal documents, meeting minutes, and so on. This makes it easier for all those involved in its implementation to understand its logic, openly discuss it, and challenge it or offer alternative thinking.

The emergent elements, however, are not equally visible or always collectively discussed. Although there have been efforts to document the main discussions in the SG meetings and requests to

provide feedback, the overall process through which some decisions are made has remained at times fuzzy or opaque for some members.

**Creative tensions among members about SSI's strategy and niche could be the focus of more explicit collective experimentation and learning to build a shared analysis of what it takes to shift the field.**

Complex systems work routinely involves conflicting and evolving opinions and perspectives. Sometimes this kind of tension can stymie the ability of a group to take action together. It is possible that this contributes to some of the "circling" behavior described in the finding above. However, systems work also often calls for small-scale, rapid experiments that enable a group to collectively learn how a system responds to different interventions. The differences in perspective held by members could be viewed as providing an opportunity for this kind of intentional testing of different hypotheses in action on a shorter cycle of action/reflection/adaptation.

In practice, SSI's strategy has also been affected by a constant balancing effort to respond to different expectations from SG members and RPA staff about the direction and focus of the Initiative. This has increased already extant ambiguities, around where strategy sits in collaborative efforts, how strategic planning happens, and the level of discretion and leeway that RPA has while maintaining the support of its funders.

Until now, this has been mitigated by directing strategy towards common ground, where there is alignment and agreement. This has enabled the Initiative to sustain engagement and support from funders, but at the cost of limiting risk taking, decreasing focus, and reducing devolved leadership at different levels of the Initiative.

**SSI is ready to center equity and power in its strategy and governance.**

Admittedly, interest on power and equity considerations have increasingly become more central to SSI discussions, particularly during the latest phase. A clear manifestation is the Power and Equity Workshop Series that SSI organized in 2022. All SSI members consistently show openness and appetite to bring in more diverse perspectives that could contest and offer alternatives to the boundary choices and assumptions that underlie the Initiative strategy. It is not, however, clear what this would look like in terms of strategic choices and the governance model. The recommendations section and the strategic scenarios offer some suggestions for SSI to consider.

## **PLANNING, MANAGEMENT AND STAFFING**

**Some adjustments in the current management approach and staffing model could improve internal efficiency, re-align ambition with capacity, and increase satisfaction.**

Operationally, RPA manages the Initiative, providing implementation capacity and infrastructure. SSI does not have permanent or full-time, dedicated staff. RPA provides internal capacity through contributions from staff who dedicate a percentage of their time to the Initiative, that they then cost-recover at the actual cost (not including overhead). The Initiative lead does not necessarily hold direct line management over RPA staff, but coordinates the work, using a matrix management model.

The main planning document for the SG and the task teams is a work plan that describes the planned activities, outputs, and assigns a responsible point person to implement them. This work plan is referred to during SG and task

team meetings and guides planning conversation. While this is helpful, it has not proven sufficient to coordinate and manage the workload to deliver results according to initial timelines and at the level of quality initially intended.

Relatedly, not all task teams have been equally effective delivering on their respective work plans. The COVID-19 pandemic, unsurprisingly, affected plans and expectations, particularly in relation to network development and relationship building. But beyond this circumstance, there is a general sense that progress could have been better in certain areas and that the quality of what has been delivered could be improved.

In an organizational reality where RPA staff works with multiple clients and on internal projects, it is essential to plan tightly and well in advance to ensure that staff have the bandwidth to deliver at their best, particularly for functions that are especially stretched, such as the Marketing, Communication and Knowledge team (which is RPA's smallest team). There are opportunities to further clarify the distribution of roles and responsibilities among team members so they are clearer on what each one is expected to deliver, by when, the remit of their mandate and level of autonomy, who has sign-off on what, and so on.

In addition, some team members have identified a large gap between the high-level strategic vision for the Initiative and its operationalization into actionable next steps that can be broken down into deliverables and milestones. This might call for stronger project management capabilities. Additional suggestions are included in the recommendations section.

## 3. Recommendations and strategic choices

This section presents recommendations and some options for future scenarios that SSI can consider for its next stage. The recommendations are organized into three main areas: 1) strategic positioning, focus, and approach; 2) governance; and 3) management and implementation.

These are applicable and remain valid for all the proposed scenarios.

### 3.1.//

#### **Recommendations about strategic positioning, focus and approach**

##### **RECOMMENDATION 1:**

##### **Focus attention and capacity and make your choice explicit**

Given the fragmentation and multitude of efforts in the field of systems change, it would be beneficial for SSI to create a stronger, externally-recognizable niche and align its efforts accordingly. This would require SSI to focus its intention more narrowly and make that choice explicit. This could mean exploring multiple pathways to change (see Recommendation 10) but it would require greater coherence between strategy and execution.

This includes more intentional targeting for specific tactics and activities and a more decisive choice between depth and breadth. SSI seems to be better-suited to cast the net wide, favoring breadth, given its far-reaching networks, constant curiosity, and appetite to forge new connections.

This is an asset that could be leveraged. Work that requires deeper, repeated engagement could be done through developing close partnerships with organizations already doing this work (see Recommendation 6). The scenarios at the end of the section as well as the learning considerations around the tactics in Table 2 provide insights to guide these choices.

##### **RECOMMENDATION 2:**

##### **Make systems change work about transformation**

The moment calls for bolder action and a strong stance. SSI's adoption of the power and equity frame was a recognition of the convergence of different discourses in philanthropy: the call for racial justice and all forms of justice more broadly, and the call for decolonizing philanthropy, which is converging with some of the systems change discourse. Systems change work should be anchored in transformation moving forward, recognizing that system change is ultimately about changing paradigms. Given SSI's leadership's

reputation and that of their funders, embracing this frame further could be potentially powerful.

We argue that this will also require articulating a vision for transformation embraced by the core group behind the Initiative. To avoid groupthink, articulating that vision or a higher-level goal may require deep listening to those at the forefront of change, both internal and external to the SSI's current membership.

This will also call for deeper shifts in the governance (see Recommendation 8) and different considerations about whose experiences and knowledge are valued (see Recommendation 4).

### **RECOMMENDATION 3:**

**Prioritize working on the deeper levers of change: mental models, norms, and power relations**

Systems change work requires changing mental models, norms, and power relations. It requires fostering the inner and relational transformation (of both people and institutions) and putting the need to challenge power relations at the center of systems change work. Using the FSG inverted pyramid of conditions of systems change<sup>32</sup>, SSI is already working on relationships and connections, and could embrace working on power dynamics and mental models more fully. Acknowledging that some systems change practitioners, such as the Academy of Systems Change and Collective Impact, have already shifted their practice towards reaching for deeper levers of change, the role of SSI will be different depending on how the next phase looks. Different scenarios indeed suggest different roles for SSI to prioritize: partnering with those already doing this deeper work in scenario 5, or convening in ways that enable a shift in power relations in scenarios 1, 2, or 4.

## **Box 4 //**

### **Recommendations for SSI and philanthropy more broadly from the Power & Equity conversation (see Annex I)**

- ▶ **Embrace plurality and work in collaboration with others in the field towards transformation:** Moving forward, systems change work should not be focused on conceptual work, frameworks, or tools, which tend to add a burden on grantee partners, but rather a plurality of perspectives while remaining clear on the goal. SSI could work collaboratively with stakeholders focused on systems change, trust-based philanthropy, or equity-based philanthropy towards the transformation of philanthropy, and ultimately pursue the transformation of systems and structures.
- ▶ **Contribute to organizing funders towards being more radical:** Organizing funders to be more radical is a project worth pursuing in the philanthropic ecosystem; SSI could play a part in this project. One way of doing this would be to encourage participants in SSI's convenings to commit to bring change to their institutions as a condition for participating in the Initiative, and then accompany them in doing so.

<sup>32</sup> Kania et al, *The Water of System Change*, 2018.





► **Beware of the colonial mindset and extractive practices:**

- Create the conditions for activists, grassroots organizations, and community members to thrive. Sustainable funding is required and long-term partnerships with change makers could be developed as prerequisites to participation in philanthropic spaces overall, and spaces created by SSI in particular.
- Create spaces that are not extractive and that are as safe as possible for participants that have historically been marginalized. Funders have to acknowledge that their understanding of what it takes to bring about systems change is limited and should bring a humble attitude and come ready to listen. If an initiative like SSI creates space for dialogues, it should let activists and change makers exert influence on their own terms.
- Acknowledge people's agency and create conditions for them to thrive and take part in building and imagining solutions. That will also require long-term partnerships and sustainable funding.

**RECOMMENDATION 4:**

**Use SSI platforms to challenge whose experiences and knowledge are valued in philanthropy**

There is an opportunity for SSI to bring more diversity of views and more radical perspectives into philanthropic spaces and acknowledge further the expertise of change makers—activists, community members, and CSOs—at the forefront of transformational system change work. SSI is creating diverse platforms that reach different parts of philanthropy, through content promotion on online communication platforms, hosting speakers at events or workshops, and via material promoted in workshops. Due to historical processes of marginalization, knowledge from different geographies in the Global South and from historically marginalized communities in all geographies is often undervalued and is not given

much airtime in primarily US-based philanthropic spaces. There could be a role for SSI to build on the work and relationships initiated with workshops in Colombia, Brazil, India, and China, alongside the work of the Power & Equity workshop series, and to bring it further by promoting the work of change makers to a global audience, particularly in Global North philanthropy circles (see Box 4 and Box 5).

As we mentioned in Table 2, philanthropy has a tendency to value inputs from peers and to be influenced by peers, which risks reinforcing biases. This recommendation is one way to mitigate this risk, externally. To take it further, it will be critical to raise awareness of how philanthropy is reproducing distorted views of reality (see Annex I). This would also call for bringing more diverse perspectives into SSI itself (see Recommendation 8).



## Box 5 //

### Recommendations on the future role of SSI, from workshop participants in Colombia, Brazil, India, and China

In contexts where new regulatory obstacles affect the flow of financial support to civil society, this work is all the more critical. That context really shapes the recommendations made by former workshop participants, as they prioritize the support of proximate leaders who are heading nonprofits. They also urge experimenting with different methods of grantmaking, taking inspiration in particular from feminist funds. A few recommendations follow:

- ▶ **Systems change work that challenges power:** Take system change work in a direction that acknowledges that a prerequisite to changing a system is an acknowledgement of and willingness to shift the power institutions and individuals hold. Push practice towards power shifting.
- ▶ **Systems change concepts that are localized:** Make sure concepts are rooted in culturally-specific thinking and practices, and seek further alignment with localized founders, priorities, and strategies.
- ▶ **SSI as a cross-scale, North-South-South connector:** Foster or create space for facilitated conversations and connection across scales and geographies, to enable the sharing of experiences, knowledge, practices, and strategizing among different Global South philanthropic ecosystems.
- ▶ **Making the case matters:** Showcasing the benefits of working with a systems change lens and adopting collaboration approaches could support others in embracing the new paradigm. Evidence of the benefits of this approach can be used by civil society to influence national and international funders (particularly multilateral agencies) and advocate for a shift in practice. This makes it particularly urgent to leave behind outdated approaches and to access multi-year, adaptive funding.

**RECOMMENDATION 5:****Develop stronger strategic partnerships and collaborate much more**

Systems change requires collaboration and there are more and more actors that are part of this conversation, and they often represent different standpoints. Stakeholders highlight that more voices are needed and recommend quality funding, different funding flows, and a deeper paradigm shift. Developing strategic partnerships will help leverage SSI's assets (its credibility to talk to donors and its convening power) to further advance the field.

This may include taking the work of this evaluation further to map other initiatives working on systems change, depending on the scenario chosen by SSI for its next phase.

Clarifying and strengthening what being a strategic partner of the Initiative entails will be critical, alongside a more targeted choice of partners based on goals and approaches (see Scenarios).

**RECOMMENDATION 6:****Improve how engagement and communication strategies are articulated**

Engagement and communication strategies could be better articulated to maximize effectiveness, and could be better tailored to different tactics. There is room for SSI to increase its online presence, leveraging the funders' communications powerhouses, provided this is agreed as a key role of SG members. If SG members are sharing their communication power, inputs need to be prepared by RPA, so that others can promote with minimum effort.

Most importantly, SSI could develop specific communication strategic partnerships to promote the work of other networks or initiatives, and vice versa. Engagement could be more tailored to different audiences and, moving forward, a critical question will be how to engage boards.

## 3.2.//

**Recommendations about governance****RECOMMENDATION 7:****Reconsider the current frame of collaboration between funders and RPA**

At this stage of maturity of the group, and given the existing level of trust and the successful learning partnership so far, it could be time to reconsider the current frame of collaboration and decision-making, in which the roles of RPA staff and funders remain fluid and flexible and where decisions are made mostly by consensus.

This would require re-appraising the role each actor plays in the Initiative, providing clearer remits and moments for decision-making (see Recommendations 8, 9 and 10), revising terms of references for the different groups (SG, project teams, task teams, etc.), and re-arranging current spaces for internal coordination.

The Initiative seems ready for funders to take a step back on the implementation and day-to-day work of the Initiative, and for RPA to take on a more directive role. This could be an opportunity for RPA to realign SSI with its internal priorities (and vice-versa), so that SSI is more integrated in RPA's institutional priorities and so that the RPA's overall advisory approach is more deeply influenced by SSI. This will improve efficiencies in the way SSI is implemented (fewer transaction costs in coordinating with multiple funders) and will also increase RPA's institutional support for SSI.

This does not mean that funders cannot provide operational support or expertise at given points in time. They could continue to provide valuable support in establishing partnerships, attracting more funding as needed, and they could leverage their respective communications powerhouses to amplify SSI's efforts (see Recommendation 6).

If the Initiative still self-identifies with a *learning-to-action journey*, and if it continues to be important for funders and RPA to come together around strategic and learning conversations, it will be necessary to maintain spaces that allow for this and to avoid silo-ing and fragmentation (see Recommendation 9).

#### **RECOMMENDATION 8:**

##### **Set up an external and diverse advisory group**

An external advisory group would guide and motivate, and also hold SSI accountable on areas of greater stretch as it embarks on its new phase. These critical friends can provide guidance, support, new ideas, and connections, and also a soft accountability mechanism for its own learning commitment on the areas where SSI would like to stretch thinking and practice. Ideally, this group would be composed of people with different professional and personal backgrounds, valuing lived experiences alongside different forms of knowledge and expertise, to bring diversity of experience and skills and stretch current thinking. This group would include civil society organizations in areas of social, economic, and environmental justice, as well as people working at the forefront of bringing about transformational change.

## **3.3.//**

### **Recommendations about implementation and management**

#### **RECOMMENDATION 9:**

##### **Embrace emergent and adaptive strategy with confidence and rigor**

A revised approach to strategy development and implementation could boost the effectiveness of the Initiative. Collective inquiry and reflective learning could offer an alternative framing to a consensus-based strategy. This could also allow SSI to model a systemic approach to strategy development that engages with complexity.

The diversity of experiences, perspectives, and mental models informing strategy are all assets to the Initiative. To make the most of them, however, a different approach to strategy development is required, to allow exploration beyond where there is agreement. There is an opportunity for SSI to engage more confidently with creative tensions, to grapple with different hypotheses, even when they seem openly contradictory, and keep an open mindset to observe where they lead.

In this context, it is less important that there is agreement on the concrete ideas that will be tested, as different hypotheses could hold true and multiple pathways could be explored simultaneously. Instead, it is more important to reach agreement on the processes of collective inquiry and reflective practice, and commit to an appropriate set of guiding principles. This could reduce pressure to respond to different priorities and generate more space and freedom in the cycle of exploration and learning. It could also help redefine accountability among actors within SSI.

For all this to work effectively, it will be important that strategic discussions and intellectual explorations (which do already take place) are systematically facilitated, then translated into actionable choices that are tangible and recognizable, so that they can be tested and explored. This would also require committing to (and sustaining) a certain degree of documentation and rigor in the approach to emergent strategy, and embedding a culture and practice of strategic thinking throughout SSI processes.

An external strategy facilitator would be helpful to hold the space for strategy discussions to take place for this next phase. The Initiative will also benefit from an external facilitator to engage more rigorously with emergent learning and strategy, and this facilitator could coach the team to embed these practices in the team's working culture.

**RECOMMENDATION 10:****Planning and management**

Some action is required to narrow the gap between the high-level vision and the concrete, actionable steps to achieve this vision.

We recommend re-organizing ways of working for greater efficiency, leveraging intellectual and strategic capital from funders, and allowing for internal coordination spaces for RPA. This could include possibly reducing the number of regular standing meetings with funders and RPA, and instead scheduling carefully-curated strategy and reflections spaces, creating time siloed off from discussions of more practical operational matters. During these strategic discussions, we would recommend prioritizing the unpacking of implicit assumptions about how strategy could unfold, to translate the high level vision into actionable plans.

Matrix management models and reconfigurable teams add flexibility to organizations, providing opportunities to reorganize skills and resources around priority projects in order to deliver the organization's best work. At the same time, these models can also be challenging to implement without making adjustments to traditional, vertical management models. In the case of SSI, there are some suggestions to mitigate capacity constraints, introduce efficiencies in the ways of working, and increase team members' satisfaction and sense of ownership in their work.

Additional management tools could also help coordinate collective work to ensure timely and quality delivery of joint projects, such as detailed timelines with a breakdown of tasks by weeks (or other periods), RACI tables, scopes of work, and so on.

We also recommend including a resourcing plan alongside the annual work plan, and that there be alignment with RPA's internal planning and prioritizing cycles, to ensure that all activities and deliverables are realistically resourced and that those involved are clear about the expectations of time commitment and the role they play.

**RECOMMENDATION 11:****Revise the current staffing model**

Defining a clearer niche (Recommendation 1) will also help SSI anticipate the roles and skills that are required. In any case there are some roles and functions that are essential regardless of the future direction of the Initiative.

Core functions include: a) the Initiative lead, who provides strategic vision and overall direction; b) the Initiative coordinator, who provides strong project management, supports the lead, helps keep the rest of the team focused and on track, and coordinates the various strands of work to ensure coherence and integration. This is a new and urgently needed role that requires adequate staffing with sufficient time and capacity; and c) the communications lead, who coordinates all external communication work. Additional roles could include leads to spearhead various priority areas depending on what SSI decides to focus on in its next phase.

Preferably, these roles will be filled from internal RPA capacity to reinforce opportunities for institutional learning. Regardless of the roles being internal or external, it is important that for all roles there is a clear scope of work to define the mandate and remit, and its boundaries, main responsibilities, accountability mechanisms, and management arrangement. This will provide greater autonomy to team members to take ownership in the remit of their roles and ensure that tasks do not fall through the cracks.

## 3.4.//

### Potential scenarios for SSI's next phase

Below are five scenarios for SSI to consider as it explores how to focus and position itself in the evolving field during its next phase.

The scenarios can provide a good basis for upcoming strategy discussions. The intent is to articulate a range of strategic choices that are well-suited to SSI's assets and that address a specific need in the field. Though they are not necessarily mutually exclusive, the scenarios help clarify different possible niches and focus areas through which SSI can accelerate its impact. They are presented in order, starting from the one that would imply the smallest stretch, to the biggest:

1. Catalyzer
2. North-South bridge builder
3. Knowledge broker and translator
4. Interest sparker to unlock funding for transformative work
5. Learning journey host

The scenarios are informed by suggestions from interviewees and sense-making conversations with the SSI team.

One important caveat: our assumption is that the recommendations above are relevant to all scenarios, although they might manifest in different ways. For example, according to the evaluation insights and recommendations, each of these scenarios should include careful attention to breaking philanthropy's echo chamber and focusing on deeper levers of change (mental models, power, and relationships).





## ► Scenario 1

### Catalyzer (most similar to SSI's current role, but with more targeted focus)

#### Underpinning hypothesis:

If funders have inspiring, intimate, candid conversations that expose them to knowledge, resources, examples, and/or experiential learning to catalyze interest about how to support large scale systems work, they will be interested in learning more and connecting with others that are interested in this approach. If SSI then connects them to other resources, cohorts, and actors in the systems change field, they would be more likely to continue learning, while network connectivity itself will also be strengthened.

#### How this could look:

SSI would play a catalyst role by introducing concepts, practices, and inspiring examples of systemic social change to a broad range of actors to spark initial interest among the unconvinced (or unintroduced). As a concierge and network broker, SSI would then help actors connect to further resources or spaces beyond SSI where they could continue learning. SSI could focus this role on an aspect of the field that is particularly underdeveloped and where they are well positioned to play, rather than competing with other catalysts, such as Illuminate<sup>33</sup>. This could mean zooming in on a particular segment (e.g., a particular geography, or with a particular audience) or adopting a role in service of the broader field that is not yet played by others (e.g., increasing funding flows).

#### Leading tactics

- Experiential learning, building connections, amplifying grantee voices and experiences.

#### What this would require of SSI

- Develop strategic partnerships and closely coordinate with other field transformation catalysts to join in existing efforts and support SSI in finding the right niche;
- Remain within self-defined boundaries for the role that SSI decides to play, handing off opportunities that exceed the scope and niche of SSI to other partners;
- Move beyond philanthropy, expanding to encompass other actors that are needed to finance systems transformation.
- Move beyond philanthropy, expanding to encompass other actors that are needed to finance systems transformation.

#### Primary audience

- To be defined based on further gap analysis and in conversation with other network weavers and transformation catalysts, such as Illuminate, Catalyst 2030, Philea, etc., and with reganters who play a bridging role between community-led organizations and institutional philanthropy.

#### SSI assets this builds on

- Breadth, diversity, and reach of connections with foundations, philanthropic actors, and grantee partners globally;
- Trajectory and experience as initiator and field-builder;
- Communication capacity, particularly if able to leverage that of its funders.

#### Risks and pitfalls

- Duplicating or competing with what other transformation catalysts are already doing or are better positioned to do;
- SSI's identity and intention could be diluted if the definition of the niche and focus is not clear.

#### Stretch for SSI

- Prioritizing audiences, tactics, and spaces;
- Establish presence in new networks (i.e., impact investing).

<sup>33</sup> <https://www.illuminatesystems.org/about>

## ► Scenario 2

### North-South Bridge Builder

#### Underpinning hypothesis:

If Southern and Northern philanthropic actors have more connection and co-learning experiences about systems change dynamics and practice from diverse perspectives, grounded in concrete “problem spaces” or issues, then these actors will develop a shared diagnosis and momentum for collaboratively addressing systems challenges together, perhaps triggering more resources to flow towards the Global South for transformative systems work.

#### How this could look:

This scenario could take different forms, and in all of them SSI’s role should remain mostly facilitative, being very mindful of the risk of reinforcing rather than dismantling colonialist structures and systemic behaviors. Options could include:

- Convening reflection and learning spaces to support North-South exchange around philanthropic practices for systemic transformation with an equity and decolonial perspective.
- Going deeper in some geographies to support civil society to develop shared diagnoses of how national and international philanthropy needs to evolve to better catalyze transformation in specific systems, on their own terms.

Experiences could be documented and shared to build a more plural and diverse understanding of systems work and philanthropic practice.

#### Leading tactics

- Primary: building connections, facilitating peer-to-peer influencing, and creating spaces for collaboration.
- Secondary: whole systems approach, fostering a sense of community.

#### What this would require from SSI

- Excellent and nuanced understanding of the context and dynamics among actors and a familiarity with the language and frames that are used to engage with systems work;
- Partnering with local actors who would lead the work in the chosen geographies, with SSI providing resources, engaging in co-creation, and using its credibility to get people to the table.

#### Primary audience

- Global North funders that fund work in the Global South;
- Emergent and established funders in the Global South;
- Influential system practitioners, leaders, and emergent philanthropic initiatives from the Global South;
- Activists, social innovators, and civil society leaders from the Global South.

#### SSI assets this builds on

- Strong reputation, influence, and credibility of RPA and SSI funders in the philanthropic sector in the Global North;
- Connections and networks in multiple geographies, including with Southern emergent philanthropy and systems innovators in the Global South.

#### Risks and pitfalls

- Introducing concepts that are alien to local contexts and that replace ideas and practices rooted in non-colonial cultural and spiritual traditions;
- Capturing or occupying a space of local actors that have more legitimacy.

#### Stretch for SSI

- Clearly define the focus of its role to prioritize, avoid dispersion or mission creep;
- Walk the tightrope of working with Global South actors while being a Global North initiative and avoiding reproducing colonial dynamics.

## ► Scenario 3

### Knowledge broker and translator

#### Underpinning hypothesis:

If knowledge about transformative systems work is more accessible to philanthropic actors, and if they can better understand how to incorporate systemic practices to their strategies and giving, they will fund in a way that is more conducive to equity-centered, large-scale systems change.

#### How this could look:

SSI would curate a comprehensive knowledge base of high quality resources for philanthropic actors to engage with a broad range of concepts and practices of systems change, and support users to access relevant knowledge by sign-posting, connecting knowledge generators, thinkers, and innovators with different audiences, and supporting the translation of this knowledge to different contexts. This would include providing a platform for less-visible perspectives that are often undervalued due to historical power dynamics, thus promoting an understanding of transformational systems change rooted in knowledge from different geographies in the Global South and from historically marginalized communities.

#### Leading tactics

- Knowledge brokering and translation; building connections.

#### What it would require from SSI

- Re-examining the emphasis on Global North/Western interpretations of and approaches to systems change work;
- Defining criteria for high-quality relevant content with a decolonizing, equity-centered perspective, and making it accessible to philanthropic audiences, particularly in the Global North. This might require an editorial board or advisory group with a more diverse range of perspectives, backgrounds, and experiences than the current SSI team;
- Inviting a diversity of voices to contribute and expand thinking to new frontiers;
- Disseminating content that others produce rather than producing its own content, unless the content focuses on what SSI is learning from what others are producing;
- Potentially curating a field-level learning agenda, replacing old knowledge flows in philanthropy with more equitable ones that enable collective action,
- Focusing on the audience that SSI is best placed to reach—leadership-level actors in progressive institutional philanthropy and donors working through RPA or similar advisors—while avoiding capture of a space that other actors should occupy.

#### Primary audience

- Broad range of philanthropic actors, global audience, but with a focus on leadership-level actors in particular (C-suite, board members, etc.).

#### SSI assets this builds on

- Breadth, diversity, and reach of connections with foundations, philanthropic actors, and grantee partners globally;
- Communication capacity, particularly if able to leverage that of its funders and secondary networks of partners, allies, and ambassadors.

#### Risks and pitfalls

- Reinforcing the current political economy of knowledge production in philanthropy, unless there is a strong decolonizing and equity-centered lens.
- Capturing, rather than amplifying, an emerging narrative.
- Having low legitimacy in certain spaces as an initiative highly identified with Northern and Western philanthropy.

#### Stretch for SSI

- Shifting from a thought and practice leadership position to the role of amplifier and broker;
- Developing connections and networks with groups and actors who are not operating in the mainstream and who are not part of SSI's regular networks.

## ► Scenario 4

### Interest sparker to unlock funding for transformative work

#### Underpinning hypothesis:

If funders are connected to spaces where social innovators, activists, community organizers, designers, artists, systems entrepreneurs, experts with lived experience, and change makers are gathering to imagine, design, and experiment, it will spark funder interest and get them excited about innovators' transformative capacity and they will find ways to support that work.

#### How this could look:

SSI would identify and connect with existing spaces supported by other funders where transformative thinkers and actors are innovating and introducing radical new thinking that addresses some of the most pressing systems challenges of our time, and then help inspired funders to learn how to support that work directly. This could de-risk transformative ideas from places and communities that have been historically overlooked and increase funding flows so that transformative work could flourish. This would require a very different mindset to the current logic of funding ideas that have been tested and proven, and that emerge from established organizations and people with a track record. At the same time, this closer engagement with transformative future designers and innovators will enable funders to better see how their funding practices can help or hinder transformative change and learn directly from those doing the work how to be better partners.

#### Leading tactics

- Connecting change makers with funders; de-risking transformative work.

#### What it would require

- Partnering with actors and funders that are already interested in this approach to support, amplify, and expand rather than fragment (e.g., Joseph Rowntree Foundation<sup>34</sup>, Guerrilla Foundation<sup>35</sup>, Partners for New Economy, Active Philanthropy<sup>36</sup>, etc.);
- Work with a network of scouts, partners, and allies who can help find promising change makers, innovators, ideas, and initiatives to support the flourishing of transformative ideas;
- Work with a plurality of perspectives;
- Support transformative systems change work in a way that is safe and non-extractivist for change makers.

#### Primary audience

- Funders open to fund transformative, paradigm-shifting work and the imagination and creative spaces that enable it to emerge and flourish;
- Social innovators, activists, community organizers, designers, artists, systems entrepreneurs, experts with lived experiences, and change makers, particularly from communities that historically have been further from opportunity.

#### SSI Strengths

- Openness to new practices and ideas if they are aligned with values;
- Direct contact through RPA's fiscal sponsorship and advisory work and through the funder's contacts with other funders, with a large network of activist and experienced philanthropic actors who could be open to participate in this exploration, support innovative work, and to work to de-risk it.

#### Risks and pitfalls

- The way in which grantees and funders interact with innovators can fall into tokenistic, colonial, or extractive practices;
- Some of the work could confront philanthropy head-on with its own origins in existing oppressive systems and invite deep reflection about how to repattern how wealth is accumulated or distributed. This will need to be carefully managed to maintain creative tension and genuine exploration with participating funders.

#### Stretch for SSI

- Exploring new frontiers of philanthropic thinking outside of mainstream philanthropy.

<sup>34</sup> <https://www.jrf.org.uk/society/emerging-futures>

<sup>35</sup> <https://guerrillafoundation.org/what-we-do>

<sup>36</sup> <https://www.activephilanthropy.org/>

## ► Scenario 5

### Learning Journey Host *Host of deep learning journeys on equity-centered systems change*

#### Underpinning hypothesis:

If philanthropic leaders who are already motivated and strategically positioned to drive change towards more equitable philanthropic practices are supported in their systems change learning and leadership journeys over a longer time horizon, they will increase their ability to influence practice internally in their organizations, so that more longer-term, adaptive resources are channeled to those who most suffer the negative consequences of injustice in a way that empowers these communities to drive transformative change.

#### How this could look:

Sustained, well-curated learning leadership journeys for cohorts of philanthropic leaders would reveal how historic, structural, and systemic elements at the root of injustice and oppression are reflected in today's world, including philanthropic practices. Participants ideally would commit to bring about changes in their organizations and be supported to navigate internal barriers to shift dominant mental models and structures that are shaped by the same forces, so that funding practices are more conducive to large-scale, transformative systems change. With an action-research flavor, the experience would be tracked and documented over time to contribute to field learning about what it takes to change philanthropic practice and support the maturity of the field towards equity-centered systems change work.

#### Leading tactics

- Primary: Experiential learning; peer influencing; learning and innovation community.
- Secondary: learning about systems change; network building.

#### What it would require from SSI

- Collaborating with a strong learning partner who will design and facilitate the journey while SSI brings connections, content, and guidance;
- Going deeper into topics such as the decolonization of philanthropy and intersectionality and its roots in Black feminist activism and scholarship;
- Crafting opportunities for deep listening to CSOs and people with lived experience doing transformative systems change work in a way that is safe and non-extractive;
- Spotlighting Global South thinkers, practitioners, and activists on these topics, as a way to be less US-centric;
- Learning from analogous efforts (ex. SUSI, GGF and Prospera FLAC, or Thousand Currents Academy);
- Putting in place a way for participants to stay connected;
- Sustained presence over a medium-term arc.

#### Primary audience

- Foundation leaders (board members, C-Suite, and program leads) already interested in systems change and equity and motivated to influence their organizations and the wider ecosystem;
- Funder collaboratives/regranterers motivated to try different approaches and who could demonstrate proof of concept in a low-risk environment.

#### SSI assets this builds on

- SSI's extensive philanthropic networks, credibility, and reputation;
- Direct connection and gravitas with leadership-level actors at foundations, funder collaboratives, and their boards.

#### Risks and pitfalls

- Insular learning limits the likelihood of deeper individual transformation, reality-based problem diagnosis, and exposure to different perspectives and experiences;
- Participants might be unable to shift mental models or funding practices in the institution without more internal allies going through a similar learning journey;
- Leadership-level participants may be unwilling or unable to commit to sustained engagement.

#### Stretch for SSI

- Sustained support over a medium-term learning journey rather than several one-off events;
- Feeling comfortable not implementing directly (but through a learning partner) and supporting a process rather than tangible deliverables.

# Annex I. Power and equity conversation, a synthesis

As mentioned throughout this report, dominant discourse on systems change in philanthropy is increasingly attending to power dynamics and slowly coming to reckon with how historical structural inequalities have shaped philanthropy.

The evaluation team hosted a conversation between Imandeep Kaur, Kumi Naidoo, Natasha Joshi, and Pia Infante, all critical voices pushing philanthropy to reckon with its power, privileges, and role in maintaining the status quo<sup>37</sup>. The conversation was framed as a way to help shape the future of the Initiative, and a small group of RPA staff joined in as listeners. We asked them to reflect on three dilemmas for SSI that emerged for the evaluation process:

- ▶ **DILEMMA 1:** How do initiatives to influence philanthropy contribute to transformative rather than performative change?
- ▶ **DILEMMA 2:** How should Global North, predominantly white-led initiatives approach efforts to influence the philanthropic sector?
- ▶ **DILEMMA 3:** How could (or should) aligned initiatives and efforts to influence philanthropy relate to one another to accelerate the transformation of philanthropy?

## THE ROLE OF PROGRESSIVE PHILANTHROPY IN FOSTERING MORE TRANSFORMATIVE SYSTEMS CHANGE

*The context calls for more radical action.*

In the face of well-organized conservative philanthropy pushing back against systems transformation, it is critical for progressive philanthropy to move away from what is currently perceived as a ‘neutral’ or transformation-agnostic stance. Grant-making is not a technical and apolitical practice. A more explicit stance on transformation could also combat the mainstream use of “systems change” in philanthropy in a way that limits more radical action, in particular through: 1) the focus on scale, understood in a limited way as working with existing institutions to replicate programs and innovations to reach a large number of people, 2) its emphasis on change levers at the top of the inverted pyramid (practices, policies, and structures) rather than substantive shifts of deeper-level change levers (relationships, power, and mental models).

<sup>37</sup> Kumi Naidoo and Pia Infante both took part in SSI's Power & Equity workshop series, which led to the Shifting Power to Shift Systems report.



### *Plurality offers us fertile ground for change and needs to be fostered.*

Systems change requires many different approaches, scales, and timelines, and progressive philanthropy should foster that plurality. Pushing for consolidation around a single conceptual trend or framework would ultimately increase constraints and burdens on grantees, paradoxically limiting our ability to advance systems change. Similarly, the plurality of related discourses around which philanthropy is gravitating (trust-based philanthropy, equity, etc.) offers a fertile ground for funders to find more entry points and pathways to more transformative work.

### *Philanthropy needs to define the problem space better.*

Foundations spend significant time and resources defining the problem space in ways that are not sufficient in identifying the real consequences of the multiple, interlocking crises we are experiencing, nor does it fully reckon with root causes: capitalism, white supremacy, colonialism, etc. Philanthropy needs to engage with others who have a clearer understanding of (and experience with) the reality of the change that is needed and what causes it, and to fully acknowledge and address its own participation in the very systems and structures that need changing. Ultimately, this will open space for the imagination of transformative alternatives.

### *Create space for a paradigm shift.*

There is a role for philanthropy in fostering the emergence of new paradigms and a bolder vision for the future. This is not philanthropy's vision to create, but philanthropy can create the conditions for creativity, openness, and collective imagination, and then stand behind these drivers. This requires supporting change makers who are currently building transformative alternatives, showcasing their work to inspire others, and driving more resources to the most transformative work.

## **HOW DO THE BEHAVIORS OF BOTH FUNDERS AND PHILANTHROPY-INFLUENCING INITIATIVES NEED TO SHIFT TO ADVANCE MORE TRANSFORMATIVE SYSTEMS CHANGE?**

### *A responsible funder takes responsibility for its complicity, and for unlearning and relearning its mental models.*

Funders need to reckon with their own power, that of their institutions, and how complicit these are in creating the conditions for the current multiple crises we are facing. They can not rely solely on grantee partners, activists, grassroots organizations, or community members to do the uncompensated labor to teach them the reality of the world or share their knowledge and experiences with them over and over again (an extractive pattern in the current system). People doing transformative work in the world need to see evidence of deeper changes in attitude among funders, including the ability to deeply listen and take action, as there is a risk of exhaustion among change makers who are tapped for wisdom but still chronically underfunded. Funders also need to provide the structures that allow for activists, grassroots organizations, and community members at the forefront of social change to sustain their work and thrive.



### *Decenter yourself and stop Global North-centrism.*

A power-aware funder decenters themselves—and philanthropy in general—as the primary holders of expertise and leading protagonists in the story of change. This means engaging instead in deep listening to and learning from grassroots organizations and community members from the Global South and from historically marginalized communities. It also means working with the recognition that many cultures have holistic systems understandings that predate and are more culturally relevant than predominantly white, Global North systems of thinking and disciplines. The Thousands Currents Academy is an example of philanthropists learning from Global South grassroots faculty about Global South, Indigenous and radical Black feminist traditions. Participating in such a learning cohort can be one part of a deep cultural shift that is needed to decenter the Global North from global conversations and ultimately go beyond tokenistic representation.

### *Do not stop disbursing money while you do the inner work.*

Long-term, multi-decade funding is necessary for systems change. But, most importantly, responsible funders need to carry on disbursing the money, regardless of internal dynamics and politics that meanwhile require deep internal work within the organization. In some parts of philanthropy, the racial justice reckoning following the murder of George Floyd has resulted in immobility, while members of staff reckon with their complicity and institutions review their strategies. Funds need to be disbursed in the meantime, as people at the forefront of social change have not stopped doing the work and quality funding is cruelly lacking.

### *Stop the measurement obsession.*

Philanthropy's obsession with measurement is, perhaps paradoxically, a significant blocker to more impactful, transformative work. Dominant measurement practices include production of sets of indicators and frameworks often imposed on grantees, developed by "measurement experts" in the Global North, and emerge as well from a certain idea of impact that relies heavily on quantitative measurement. Emphasis on these approaches to measurement can disincentivize people from the harder, deeper work of transformative change that is not so amenable to pre-determined quantitative metrics. Responsible and power-aware funders should display aggressive humility in this field, and open up space for people to shape solutions as well as the way these solutions are assessed. This will allow for more nuanced knowledge to be compiled and thus will result in the generation of a higher-resolution picture.

### *Think differently about risk.*

The dominant frame for risk in philanthropy is focused on a narrow, funder-centric risk calculation, which drives funders away from a range of practices that work for systems change. This narrow thinking about risk indeed limits funders' willingness to offer longer-term funding, to fund more deeply challenging work that faces resistance from those who benefit from the current system, or to fund collaborative, multi-sector, or innovative work. Risk should be reframed to focus on the risks inherent in chronically underfunding systems change work while simultaneously abundantly funding work that keeps existing systems dynamics in place, which ultimately exhausts the people who are actually doing the work to transform systems.

# Annex II. Evaluation principles and methodology

This work was guided by five design principles, striving for an evaluation that was co-created, learning-led, and emergent, that centered equity and power, and put evidence to use. In this Annex, we introduce these principles and explain how they shaped our methodological choices.

## *Facilitating a co-creation process*

The evaluation was conducted as a joint discovery and learning journey where SSI SG members, RPA staff, and evaluators committed to embark on an emergent process, making decisions collaboratively along the way.

During the inception phase, we held two workshops and eight interviews to help identify the key strategic dilemmas for the Initiative and allow us to tailor the evaluation approach to address these dilemmas. We held five sense-making workshops over the course of the evaluation, which provided opportunities to collectively reflect on and interpret the findings that were emerging. These findings informed evaluation design choices and helped focus our analysis. We also scheduled weekly or bi-weekly check-ins with SSI's leadership during the evaluation, and participated in regular SG and task team internal meetings. These were also opportunities to co-create the evaluation process as well as build its main narrative.

## *Being led by learning*

The evaluation of SSI was a component of a bigger learning agenda that emerged as the Initiative grappled with strategic decisions about its future. In this context, we consider this evaluation learning-led, and we embedded learning throughout the process. For each sense-making workshop, the evaluation team prepared a learning brief with initial findings, reflections, and a selection of questions to guide the discussion.

The choice of qualitative and participatory methods came from a recognition that these tools are better suited to provide a wide variety of rich, nuanced perspectives around which we can center learning and contribute to collective reflection. This allowed for the process to be dialogical throughout. We conducted **37 semi-structured interviews<sup>38</sup>**, held **three participatory dialogues** with former workshop participants in Kenya, India, China, Colombia, and Brazil, and hosted **a roundtable** focused on shifting power for transformative systems change. SSI leadership and RPA staff were invited to join the dialogues and roundtable. In total we spoke with **84 people** as part of this evaluation.

Thinking about the philanthropic sector as an ecosystem, the evaluation brought together information and perspectives from different

<sup>38</sup> The interviews lasted between 30 minutes and 1 hour.

parts of that ecosystem and from among SSI's constituents, as well. As such, the qualitative interviews took place with SSI funders, RPA staff, and task team members directly involved in the Initiative (10 interviews), with organizations SSI intended to develop key partnerships with (10 interviews), and with people who have their finger on the pulse of system change and philanthropy (14 interviews)<sup>39</sup>. This latter group included philanthropic advisors, philanthropic networks, organizations focused on systems change practices, regranters, and civil society organizations. As we made sense of the different insights gathered, it became clear that we needed to conduct additional interviews with participants of the 2019 Assessing System Change workshop and the 2022 Power and Equity workshop (3 interviews).

We also reviewed documentation generated by the Initiative (the work plan, meeting minutes, the event participants' directory, etc.), took part in Initiative meetings, and reviewed systems change and philanthropic literature. We also worked with and drew from Steve Waddell's **webcrawl analysis** and Sarah Gemski's **annotated bibliography**.

### Embracing emergence

In contrast with linear evaluative approaches, this evaluation was developmental in nature and embraced emergence as a way to engage with the complexity of systems change work. The first five months of the evaluation were used to broaden SSI and the evaluation team's perspectives and understanding, and collectively interpret what was already emerging. The inception phase indeed led the team to develop an [emergent learning](#) framework to guide SSI stakeholders in discussions related to strategy development.

The monthly sensemaking spaces were purposefully facilitated to help the SSI team reflect on and interpret emerging findings, and share further insights to connect the evaluation with the strategic dilemmas at play. The final sensemaking workshop was an opportunity for the team to discuss recommendations and strategic choices for the next phase of the Initiative.



<sup>39</sup> We drew on the Bellwether methodology to better understand the state of the field and to probe the Initiative's influential role. We also drew lightly from contribution analysis: our qualitative inquiry through interviews and participatory dialogues prompted participants to share specific events, stakeholders, or factors more broadly that may have been influential in fostering the adoption of a systems change lens and practices in philanthropy and interrogated how these interacted with SSI.

### *Centering equity and power*

The evaluation was attentive to power dynamics and how different systems of power—heteropatriarchy, white supremacy, and colonialism, etc. manifest in philanthropy, from the structural to the individual levels, as well as within evaluation processes.

We intentionally sought to represent different perspectives throughout the evaluation, including perspectives that are marginalized within the SSI ecosystem in particular, and, through purposeful facilitation, strove to create spaces where multiple perspectives could be voiced and heard.

Regarding the choice of interviewees, on the one hand, we prioritized Global South philanthropic networks or stakeholders from organizations with which SSI intended to develop key partnerships. On the other hand, we made sure to interview regranters and civil society organizations receiving philanthropic funding, as they are experiencing systems change practice adoption from philanthropic organizations, and are the closest to systematically and historically marginalized communities in the philanthropic ecosystem. We were also intentional in bringing perspectives from people and organizations coming to systems change work with a justice perspective. This extended to the documents and literature we reviewed.

The participatory dialogues we hosted brought together 34 different individuals, philanthropic institutions, and civil society organizations from China, India, Kenya, Colombia, and Brazil. These dialogues, alongside a roundtable organized with four persons advocating in different ways for philanthropy to grapple with its power, privileges, and role in maintaining the status quo (see Annex I), were also opportunities to give various SSI constituents a chance to shape the future of the Initiative. This was in recognition of the fact that “many foundations learn, interpret data, and draw conclusions in relative isolation, cut off from different points of view and challenges to their interpretations of what data imply for action” (Beer et al., 2021). By bringing these various groups together, we intended to offer alternatives to the boundary choices and assumptions that underlie the Initiative’s current strategy.

### *Putting evidence to use*

Thinking about the use of evaluation from the onset is critical for such an exercise to be beneficial overall and to lead to strategic changes. The inception phase thus helped us identify the different frameworks that guided the process. Taking a collaborative and iterative approach to sensemaking not only brought out diverse views, rich discussions, and deeper learning, but it was also a way to be more effective in shaping the Initiative’s subsequent strategic phase.

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SHIFTING  
SYSTEMS  
INITIATIVE



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EVALUATION OF THE  
SHIFTING SYSTEMS INITIATIVE

